

1 Timothy 1:12-17. 4th after Pentecost - 12.6.2016.

Jesus takes our Then, changes us Now, and gives us a Future

[¹² I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength to do his work. He considered me trustworthy and appointed me to serve him, ¹³ even though I used to blaspheme the name of Christ. In my insolence, I persecuted his people. But God had mercy on me because I did it in ignorance and unbelief. ¹⁴ Oh, how generous and gracious our Lord was! He filled me with the faith and love that come from Christ Jesus.]

¹⁵ This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" – and I am the worst of them all. ¹⁶ But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life. ¹⁷ All honour and glory to God forever and ever! He is the eternal King, the unseen one who never dies; he alone is God. Amen.

[NLT]

Last Sunday we heard that we have been made fellow-citizens with all the saints - with all those whom we read of in the Old and New Testament (Ephesians 2:17-22). Have you ever stopped to consider who these people we call saints were before their lives were changed? The thing is, heaven will not only be populated by people who lived perfect lives from start to finish. Many of the 'saints' we hear and read of had quite a history! We might even say: Their names appear in the Bible in spite of what they had done.

Think of Jacob and his sons - Jacob who had deceived his father and cheated his brother of the blessing; the sons, who hated their brother so much that they were ready to kill him - but then sold him as a slave, and yet we hear that their names appear on the gates to the new Jerusalem (Revelations 21:12). Think of David, who in spite of his many wives, had to have a woman who was already married - and had her husband killed. Think of 'St Peter', who swore that he did not know this Jesus of Nazareth, and even cursed himself!

Think of 'St Paul' - a man who had persecuted the church. Can you imagine what it must have felt like if one of your family had met their death because of his actions. Would they not have been justified in asking, "Can we really trust him? Remember what he did!"

Paul is an example of what it means that

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Paul almost certainly did not keep on speaking about his past. But he did not shy away from speaking about it when it came to giving Christ the glory for the way in which he had acted in his life. Christ had taken Paul's past to the cross, and had died for his sins. He had filled this man who had blasphemed Christ and hated all Christians with **faith and love**.

We may sometimes wonder why Christ chose Paul of all the people he could have chosen to be his apostle. Paul had found the answer to this riddle - and one can hear the awe as he writes here, **God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life.**

If God can take Paul's past, if he can forgive him for all that he has done, then this applies to others also - even **the worst sinners!** We have heard the message of God's love and forgiveness over and over, yet we seem to forget at times that Jesus did not come into the world because we were actually quite OK. Paul had realised - and so must we -: "**Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners!**"

Jesus came into the world knowing full well what kind of people he would have to deal with - and what needed to be done so that we can be saved. We hear that Jesus was not particular with the company he kept - over and over he is accused of associating with known sinners, people others avoided. But by coming to them, he was able to change them - as was the case with Zacchaeus and many others. [The Theme-verse of this Sunday is the last verse of the story of Zacchaeus - after Jesus had eaten with him, and Zacchaeus is changed from the person who overcharged taxes, to one who now returned money to those he had cheated! Luke 19:1-10]

And so he set about changing Paul - turning him from a fierce opponent of the message of the cross to an apostle who would preach this message, even when it brought him persecution and hatred from his own people.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - the people we meet here in church are saints because of what Christ has done in their lives. But the church is not

peopled with perfect people - with those who have never sinned. But we are a people who have been forgiven, and to this day live only by the **great patience** of our Lord with us.

Christ has patience with even the worst sinners - as Paul writes here. Of course not everyone has a 'dark past' - although more people than we might think have something we would rather others did not know about. Yet, Christ has taken our past, and has redeemed it - has changed us from sinners to be the saints we are, and are to be.

What a wonderful message for a world that has little patience with those who have sinned against us - or whose past misdeeds are part of the public record. It seems to be one thing for us to accept that there were people in the Bible who had a far from perfect past - and that they were changed. But, how do we react to those who do have a past that others know about? How do we react when we hear that somebody has been in prison for a heinous crime, but they have had their past redeemed by Christ, and have a changed life now?

Do we not wonder whether they have really changed - or are they just doing this so that they will be accepted by society again? How much proof must such a person offer that they have truly changed and become reformed people - that they have been **filled ... with the faith and love that come from Christ Jesus.**

Using his own experience to point to Christ's great patience, Paul encourages us today also to trust in the loving forgiveness of our heavenly Father - that means accepting the forgiveness God gives you, if you have a dark past. But also to accept those others who have a dark past, because they have been accepted by God to be his very own people.

Jesus has taken our past, he has changed our present, and he gives us a future. That is his message for you and me - and for all people. As we begin to understand this grace of God - this gift that in spite of our past we are loved and accepted -, we cannot but join with Paul in saying, almost as a Creed: **All honour and glory to God forever and ever! He is the eternal King, the unseen one who never dies; he alone is God. Amen.**