

Sunday 13th August 2017

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: 25 “God is here! As we his people”
 159 “Not far beyond the sea, nor high”
 322 “How sweet the name of Jesus sounds”
 410 “Lord, your Church on earth is seeking”

READINGS: Romans 10:5-15
 Matthew 14:22-33

“HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET” – BEING MESSENGERS

Last Sunday many people had difficulty in getting to Church at Wesley’s Chapel – the World Athletics Marathon was being run around the streets of London. Marathons have become very popular all around the world, no self-respecting city is without its own marathon or half-marathon. Yet I think that most of us have forgotten where the name ‘marathon’ comes from.

Do you remember the name Pheidippides from your school days? He was the Greek messenger who ran from the battlefield of Marathon all the way to Athens to announce that the Persian attackers had been defeated in the battle there. This was in 490 B.C.

It is said that Pheidippides ran the entire distance from Marathon to Athens (42.2 miles) without stopping and burst into his Assembly to announce the good news, ‘we have won’ before collapsing and dying.

When the modern Olympic Games were revived in 1896 – the marathon – a race of the distance that Pheidippides ran – was introduced as a special race. For Pheidippides the news of the victory was so good, so important that he had to deliver it as soon as possible.

This story about the marathon is what came into my mind as I read the final verses of the passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans – “how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.”

Paul was urging his Roman listeners to grasp the amazing nature of the good news of Jesus and his Kingdom and to bring it with excitement and urgency to others. For Paul, the point is that this news is so good, so welcome that those who receive it will want to kiss the person delivering it.

When we read this and think about these words, I think we realise that we have lost something of this excitement, the urgency and sheer wonder of what God has done for humankind in sending Jesus.

The apostle Paul did not invent the phrase, 'how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.' He was quoting the prophet Isaiah because that is the way that Isaiah had prophesied how people would feel about the heralds as they ran to bring the good news of God's salvation to Israel.

The words of Isaiah are set during the time of the Babylonian exile. The people of Israel, God's people, were languishing in a far off land. The prophets of the time had admonished the people, saying that their plight – their exile in a foreign land – was a result of their sin and rebellion against God. But there was also and always the hope of restoration. Nevertheless the exile was a dark night for the people of Israel.

In such circumstances it was natural and understandable for the people to doubt God's power to save them. It was natural that they would wonder whether the gods of the Babylonians were stronger and all the more so as the peoples' exile had lasted a long time.

No doubt, the people asked, 'where is our God?' 'What is he doing?' 'Why is he seemingly so quiet and inactive and for so long?' And then suddenly, as recorded in Isaiah 52:7 a messenger appears running over the mountains. The messenger is exhausted, he's struggling for breath yet the messenger continues to run because nothing less than running is sufficient for breaking such news. His exhaustion, his breathlessness cannot prevent him from blurting out a message of excitement – 'peace to you, salvation is at hand, your God reigns!'

Here, at last was good news for a people in exile. It is reference back to this passage that Paul uses to stir up his listeners in Rome.

In this difficult and dense passage of his letter to the Romans Paul has a serious and urgent message for his Jewish hearers – salvation is for all, it has always been for all – 'there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call upon him.' Paul was aware that his fellow Jews were stuck in the past. They considered themselves the chosen people, they were still awaiting a Messiah and they had abandoned their vocation to be a light to the nations. They had become inward-looking. The people of Israel were in danger of seeing their own plans as God's plans and closing their ears to anything which might disturb their situation.

For Paul everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved' and there was an urgency in delivering this message to both Jew and Gentile. Jesus' second coming was expected imminently in the time of Paul and that was part of the urgency that Paul felt to spread the good news of the salvation of Jesus. But far more important that that Paul just could not keep 'good news' to himself – he wanted to

share it as widely as possible. So we see Paul undertaking dangerous journey after dangerous journey, by sea and by land, around the countries of the Mediterranean Sea. He was impelled by the spirit to share the message of Jesus with as many people as possible. He was downhearted when people would not listen to him, distressed when they received the message and then distorted it but never lost hope that the message of God's salvation would spread around the world. We can see this same pattern of Paul's enthusiastic and energetic preaching replicated time and time again over the years.

As Paul had tried to rouse his people from their spiritual slumber in his day so did the Wesley's in 18th century Britain. After a century of religious strife between Catholic and Protestant, Protestant and Protestant – the nation and the church wanted a quiet life. But the nation was in a state of rapid change. 18th century Britain was transforming itself from a rural country to an urban one – mines, factories and new forms of transport were springing up and the nation was on the move into new settlements. The Church was in the countryside and in the old-established towns – but not in the new settlements. 'How were these people to believe in one of whom they had never heard? And how were they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how were they to proclaim Jesus unless they were sent? It was in response to this situation that the Wesleys travelled tens of thousands of miles on horseback – taking the good of Jesus around the country. Then they identified and commissioned others to proclaim the good news.

Not everyone listened attentively to their words – some threw stones and rotten vegetables at the Wesleys. Not everyone who heard them stayed the course – some fell away but the faith of the Wesleys in the God who had revealed his grace to them could not be shaken. They persisted in preaching that urgent message of salvation – in season and out of season.

And just as Paul and his fellow apostles had travelled outside their home areas to spread the gospel around the Mediterranean Sea, so did the missionaries of the 18th and 19th centuries travel to far off lands from their European or American base with the urgent message of salvation. Many of those missionaries died within a few weeks because of disease, others were looked on suspiciously as agents of colonial powers and were killed or refused entry. Yet the urgent work of preaching God's love for all went on, bringing healing and hope, education and possibilities of a new life for so many people.

'How beautiful were the feet of those who carried the Gospel of Christ around this country and around the world.'

And now to us in our generation. Last week Leslie spoke of the Transfiguration of Jesus. The disciples wanted to build shelters on the mountain and to stay there. We, like Peter, James and John are often tempted to want to stay in church, continue to worship, feel close to God and be with like-minded people. Yet our work is out there – at the bottom of the mountain where people will mock us for our faith or be

bewildered that modern people like us can still believe in a God who sent his son to die for love of humankind.

Yet, as St Augustine said, “you have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” This is true for all people, not just for Christians or people of other faiths. God is still seeking to speak into the hearts and minds of his restless people so that, in the words of Paul, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

But our God needs messengers, needs people who will live out and speak out the gospel so that others can hear and believe. Doing that was never easy, Paul and the succession of preachers after him met with success and failure, and lived a life full of disappointment as well as hope but they never gave up and God sustained them through it all.

This morning we have baptised Janelle and we, all of us, have made a promise to her and to all the young people given into our care, we have promised that we shall maintain the Church’s life of worship and service so that she and others may grow in grace and in the knowledge and the love of God and of Jesus.

That’s a big promise – a big commitment but we have to go further than that and promise to be messengers not just here in Church but outside in the world around us. The full implication of this is spelt out in the words of St. Theresa of Avila –

“Christ has no body now on earth but yours
No hand but yours
No feet but yours
Yours are the eyes through which to look out with Christ’s compassion to the world.
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless people now.
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.”

How beautiful are those feet which bring the good news to our generation. Amen