

Reflection for Sunday 3rd July 2022 by Rev'd Peter Shaw.

In a television interview with the famous American footballer and wrestler turned actor and philanthropist – Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, he was asked about a low time in his life when he was very discouraged about his career and future and by all accounts, he had a very bad start in life. "How did you make your way back from that?" he was asked.

“The Rock” replied, "You have to put yourself out there. You have to get out there and fail, and learn from your failures."

This all begs the question as to what advice would you give to someone who is discouraged by life? How do we deal with discouragement ourselves? Whether it's a low point in your work life, a serious health issue, a difficult family situation, something you've been working hard at and yet you're not seeing results, doing the right thing in the face of criticism, being disappointed in a friend, struggling in our personal spiritual lives, frustrated and afraid of events in our increasingly dysfunctional and dangerous world -- whatever the source of your discouragement, how do we cope?

Is it enough to tell ourselves to get out there and try? Or do we sometimes need a break to get away from it all? Take a hot bath, get a good night's sleep, pray, keep a journal, go for a walk, eat healthy foods, develop a hobby, exercise, learn deep breathing -- all these things can all help us deal with the discouragement and stress of life. But is there something more for the challenges we face?

In our New Testament reading today - toward the end of his letter to the Galatians - the apostle Paul addresses this very issue.

At the beginning of chapter 6, he instructs his readers to work for the good of their community -- restoring anyone who has fallen into sin, guarding themselves against temptation, acting responsibly, taking care of one another including those with the responsibility of teaching. It might seem like a lot of obligation -- especially in light of Paul's insistence on their freedom in Christ! To counter any sense of discouragement they might have, Paul goes on to offer them encouragement to persevere in this good work.

Beginning in Galatians 6:7 and following, Paul cheers them on. In effect, he says, if you're tempted to give up -- don't! Don't be deceived by your feelings of discouragement. Don't be deceived by the difficulties in your life. Don't be deceived by the hardships in this world. Instead, take God seriously – focus on Him and not on this world - and keep on doing good, because one day there will be a great harvest -- a harvest of compassion and good works in this hurting world, a harvest in a growing family of believers, a harvest of eternal life. If we do not give up.

Instead of focusing in on ourselves, on our own discouragements and failures, on whatever challenging situation we might face, we need to take the long view. Our immediate concerns are just that -- immediate concerns. But they are also part of a much larger context, a bigger picture that can give us hope beyond ourselves and what this earthly life can offer.

The rhythm of sowing and reaping was a familiar one in the ancient world. To gain a harvest required the hard work of sowing, the careful work of weeding, the patient work of waiting, and finally the joyfully tiring work of the harvest. Here, Paul applies this familiar process to the spiritual realm: if we sow bad deeds, you will eventually reap corruption, if not in this life then in the next; if we sow to the Spirit -- though we may have suffering for a little while and though we may grow weary -- we will reap eternal life.

So we shouldn't give up -- in fact, as Paul tells us in verse 10: "whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith" (v. 10). The churches of Galatia had been disrupted by conflict between those who insisted the Jewish religious law must still be followed and those who did not; between those who recognized Paul's role as an apostle and those who criticized his leadership.

Perhaps that's why Paul adds the special note about "the family of faith" -- to heal their divisions, they especially needed to work for the good of their own community ***rather than individually for themselves!***

Paul interrupts himself at this point with verse 11: "See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!" There is a break in his train of thought here, but it's a wonderful human detail, a reminder that the book of Galatians is not primarily a theological textbook, even though it reads that way in part. This is a personal and pastoral letter addressed to a church in need of admonishment and encouragement.

In the final verses of our reading, the apostle summarizes everything else he's said in Galatians so far: about circumcision and the law, about persecution and the cross of Christ, about crucifixion and new creation. He draws together the different strands of his letter here, but the heart of our passage is verse 15: "For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!"

For the Galatians, one of the key issues in this letter was that some people were pushing them to follow the

Jewish law, specifically circumcision. Established long ago in the time of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 17:9-14), circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with them and with all the generations that would follow. It was the essential mark of following the law. It was the mark of being a real Jew. And these Galatian Christians were being pushed to practice circumcision as if the cross of Christ was not enough.

Paul writes in large letters to be very clear: To be a Christian you don't have to become a circumcised male baby first. In Christ, there is a new creation, a new order of things. There is a new freedom from the old religious law. Even those who were pushing for circumcision didn't keep the whole law, Paul argued. As he writes earlier in Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." All those distinctions no longer make sense because there is a new creation. Second Corinthians 5:17 says, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new." Ephesians 2:15 describes it as a "new humanity." Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10 talk about it as putting on a "new self."

Illustrations of this new creation are often drawn from the natural world. Like the caterpillar that spins a cocoon is hidden away for weeks or months and suddenly emerges as a butterfly. Or the bulb that is planted before the snow of winter that grows into a bright red tulip in the spring. These are variations on Paul's earlier image of sowing and reaping. If you plant a bulb, you get a flower. If you patiently wait, the caterpillar will turn into a butterfly.

But God's new creation in Christ is radically different. It's more like planting a bulb and getting a mountain or the caterpillar turning into a star. **It was so radically new** that even circumcision with its long history and all its religious significance no longer applied. For Paul and for the Galatians, what counted was being this radically new creation! For us today, what counts is being a new creation, **a new creation in a tired, frequently Godless and corrupt old world!**

In my own strength, I can never do enough. In your own strength, you can never do enough. In this world, there is always another failure. Even when we learn from our failures, there is another one just around the corner! There is always more good work to be done. When we face difficulties of various kinds, when the world seems spinning out of control – and with all that is going on internationally at the moment, it certainly feels like it -, when our prayer list keeps getting longer and heavier, discouragement can set in.

There is a word of encouragement from this lovely and encouraging piece of Holy Scripture. Don't be deceived by our discouraging feelings! Don't be deceived by our apparently overwhelming situation or that of the wider world! Do not grow weary in doing good -- we are a new creation! Do not grow weary in dealing with whatever challenges we are facing -- we are a new creation – bright beacons of Christ's love and compassion for all in a world so desperately in need of it!

All this is not about trying to make a good impression, which Paul mentions as one motive in our text. That's what he means by making "a good showing" (v. 12) or boasting about the flesh (v. 13) -- those are only attempts to look good on the outside. Nor is it about avoiding persecution, which is another motive he mentions (v. 12). Instead of worrying about what looks good, instead of trying to avoid persecution or criticism from others, we need to do the right thing and keep on doing it. For the things of this world -- keeping up appearances, being anxious about what others might think -- these things are part of the world that has been crucified to me, and I to the world as Paul says here (v. 14). What he is saying here that instead of all this, we live to Christ - We live according to a new creation!

So when discouragement descends and weighs us down, when we are weary of doing what is right -- yes, let's get a good night's sleep, go for a walk, or try one of the many other healthy options. Over and above those things though, let's also remember that our efforts are not in vain -- we have a share in the coming harvest of eternal life. Let's remember who we are and whose we are -- we belong to Christ, and in him, we are a new creation. In him we receive new strength and life and find God's blessing of peace and mercy if we do not give up – **and we must always focus on Christ!**

So bearing in mind St Paul's message to us in this passage, let us pray:

O God of new creation, re-create your faith and hope in us. Where there is failure, let us sow forgiveness and the restoration of community. Where there is temptation, let us sow perseverance in doing what is right.

Where there is pain - comfort, where there is discouragement - especially with current world events - hope. Let us rest in the peace and mercy of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. **Amen.**