

## Reflection for Pentecost 10 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

The pressure that we face with different aspects of life's journey can be a very strange thing. Some folk thrive on pressure, others find it pulling them down, like a millstone around their neck and they struggle to cope. We all cope differently with pressure situations. Maybe this is one of the differences between a true champion and the also-rans at the highest level of sport - not ability or skill, but the way they respond to pressure.

Today's epistle reading from Hebrews is one that picks up this theme. How should the church respond to pressure - pressure that is often tending to turn us away from God and from walking in the footsteps of Christ? What is pressure doing to our faith, is it remaining constant or being eroded?

We find in this passage in Hebrews: it is one of those iconic biblical verses.

*"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us."*

Think of the football stadium. Once a team's heads start to drop, so too does its self-belief and, along with that its results. You can almost see the self-belief draining out of team as they ship a couple of quick goals. The same can be true of the church and of us as individual Christians.

In the epistle the writer suggests two methods of combating this sapping of one's faith. First, by placing very clearly in front of his readers the image of Christ - the image of the one on whom our faith is founded. He is the supreme example of a life committed to faith, expressed through endurance and submission to God's will. Reflect on the image of Christ and his suffering - those images we relive each year during Holy Week: the sense of rejection, the sense of humiliation, the sense of pain and suffering, the weight of sin placed upon his shoulders. Did he give up, did he walk away? No!

Rather, he came through that time of darkness and is now crowned with glory, seated at the right-hand of God the Father.

In our moments of trial, when our faith is tested, it is useful to ask - how does this pressure compare with what Christ suffered for me? When we do so, we often find our own situation is placed back into its rightful context. We begin to see how, in our own suffering, we are being united with the suffering of Christ.

One of the questions that often comes when faith is put to the test is, WHY? This is just not fair! What did I do to suffer this way? Where is God in all this?

Such questions may well lead us to spend some time reading & reflecting on the Old Testament book of Job - a book that struggles with exactly these questions.

In the story, God gives permission for the devil to put Job's faith to the test through both disaster and illness. He loses all his wealth, his ten children and finally his health. His relations and fellow town's folk interpret his misfortune as divine punishment for his sin, which must, by the nature of the calamities be great.

There then follows a series of conversations between Job and friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar; each one trying in a different way to get Job to repent. Job, though, is adamant. Firstly, he will not repent for something he has not done, and secondly, he will not curse God.

As the dialogue unfolds, Job gets more and more exasperated with his friends: he turns to God and challenges him, asking why? Please explain!

When God's answer finally comes it is not what Job either wants or expects. God paints a wonderful picture of the universe and his place within it, and in doing so he asks a Job a series of questions. Underlying all of these questions is just one - Job, what right have you to question me? Then finally Job does get an answer - "I am God".

*“Then Job answered the LORD.*

*I know, LORD, that you are all-powerful; that you can do everything you want.*

*You ask how I dare question your wisdom when I am so very ignorant.*

*I talked about things I did not understand,  
about marvels too great for me to know.*

*You told me to listen while you spoke and to try to answer your questions.*

*In the past I knew only what others had told me, but now I have seen you with my own eyes. So I  
am ashamed of all I have said and repent in dust and ashes.”*

What the story of Job reminds us, is that we live in a broken world, where things appear to be unfair; a world where sin, in its broadest sense has distorted the way God wants things to be, in what can only be described as an unfair way: and that distortion does affect those we would call innocent.

Yet it also reminds us that there are some questions, suffering being one, where we will never get what we may think of as a satisfactory answer, certainly this side of eternity.

Returning to the epistle, the writer lists several Old Testament characters, reflecting on their stories. Many of them appear at times to be in situations where they feel helpless - things are beyond their control. The only direction they can look is towards God - not with a merely hopeful glance, but with the eye of faith and expectancy, and a heart full of prayer – hoping that God will act and will do decisively.

There is one major catch, as Gideon was to discover. God does not tend to work alone – God often uses us as his tools or instruments, doing so in a way that the victory is clearly seen as God’s, not our own.

So often, as we struggle along on our journey of faith, we do so in our own strength - as we sit in front of the TV our sense of helplessness comes from our own self-belief or lack of it. We forget all too quickly that God is our strength. It is only as his spirit moves that things begin to change.

For Gideon, understanding that it was God’s victory meant having gathered together a fighting force of some 32,000 men reducing their number not by a few but to less than one percent.

Are you afraid? If so, go home – goodbye to 22,000

Go and drink from the brook – only those who lap the water from their hands can stay - goodbye to another 9700

Only 300 left. What chance have we now? In a straight battle and in daylight **none**, but follow God’s directions and, at night, with the cry “A sword for the Lord and for Gideon,” confusion reigns and victory is won; that lead to 40years of peace.

When God moves nothing is impossible. It is us who are so often surprised not only when he does move but also by the way he moves.

So often all we do is sit and say - I can do nothing And that may very well be true: but when God acts things are turned upside down.

Which, once again, brings me to the writer of Hebrews and how all these threads are woven together. God is not the source of the trouble and persecution his readers are suffering, but he can and does use it to mould them into a people who are stronger in their faith and more reliant on him and, as a result, are better equipped for his service.

Like with Christ, so with them - God can and does turn defeat and pressure into glory.

Three points for us to note then today.

1. That in the face of suffering we need to focus on the image of Christ – he has been there before us and endured to the end.
2. That our world is broken by the effects of sin and yes, things are unfair.
3. God can and does use those situations to build and strengthen us, both our faith and the faith of those around us.