

Unbroken

An address by Revd Mandy Flaherty

I watched a film recently on Netflix called Unbroken – I recommend it to you to watch if you haven't seen it. It tells the true story of the little known Olympic Athlete Louie Zamperini who competed in the 1936 Olympics in the 5,000 metre race where he finished 8th. After that, he was a pilot in the US airforce during WW2 who was shot down from his plane and survived through floating on a dinghy in the sea, only then to be captured by the Japanese and held as a prisoner of war for two years. The film is about his resilience and spirit really. When I was watching it, I looked up a brief synopsis such as I have given you now and I knew that he survived his sea ordeal but I didn't know how long he was at sea for. I haven't told you either, so as to keep the suspense should you find yourself watching the film! There were three men who survived the plane crash and ended up on the dinghy and the film cleverly moves through the time they are on the sea, beginning with the recollection from one of the men that a previous airman had survived 24 days at sea. What was their fate going to be? Although the film is famous for its depiction of the cruelty of the Japanese POW camps and Louie's treatment there in particular, I was interested in the stranded at sea part of the story which is a fascinating insight into the human spirit, leadership and resilience. These guys don't know where they are going, how long it will be before they are rescued, if at all; they face death and threat daily and the physical and mental toll is unimaginable.

A rudderless boat going nowhere but propelling them somewhere. A time over which they have no control. I don't know if you feel like there is a certain rudderlessness to our lives at the moment but it is true that we are in a time of uncertainty and we don't know how many days we are going to be at sea, which can feel disturbing. There is that well known quote 'Focus on what you can control; leave what you can't' and this is very much allied to the Serenity Prayer 'God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference'. In the film, the three men lapsed quite naturally into separate roles and ways of being in their situation. There was the very scared person who needed lots of comforting and reassuring, there was the self orientated man who looked out for himself and there was the Leader who mapped things out in his head and was methodical – who perhaps took on board mentally the quotes I have just made. Today is Trinity Sunday and please don't misunderstand me, I am not making any comparison between these three men and the Holy Trinity! Rather, I wanted to focus on and say a little bit about leadership, since I have drawn this out of our readings today.

From chapter 40 in Isaiah, we have a Messianic message and the theme is consolation – alleviating the threat and worry and fear of the people who are afraid of Jerusalem being conquered and them being sent into exile. They needed reassurance that they could trust God to deliver them. Isaiah consoles them with his rhetorical message of a God who has power over all the earth and who will sustain them. The famous part at the end of today's reading speaks of youths who will not be weary and those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, shall run and not be weary, shall walk and not be faint.' It is a tremendous image of empowerment. It is not power for power's sake. Isaiah speaks God's word as one who has dominion over all things but yet he empowers us human beings to be able to live with strength and courage, reassured that He is in control. Our psalm for today is psalm 8 which takes a similar theme, describing God as the one who made the stars, the moon and the whole universe, yet considered little humanity to be worthy of running the whole show! Leadership that instils confidence in those who take up important roles is true leadership.

So today is Trinity Sunday and we, traditionally, reflect at the work of the Trinity at this point in our season – after Pentecost, when the work of Jesus on earth is complete and the Spirit has arrived to empower and equip. We all need strength, power and courage to face each day, metaphorically

as we travel on our seas as we face daily threats – of the virus, of injustices, of racism, of poverty, of redundancy, of break ups and breakdowns. Each day we may have to comprehend a new threat or difficulty and we need something to go back to and draw on to give us that strength and courage. On Trinity Sunday we can reflect on the three persons of the Trinity needing each other to be strong. That's why we pray blessings in triplicate as it were! The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – only then is it complete and only then can we draw on God's strength to help us in each of our situations. God the Son, Jesus, is our example on earth but God the Father is the God Isaiah talks about who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand. God the Holy Spirit is the one who brings us together TO God and is talked about in the Corinthians reading as 'the Communion of the Holy Spirit' - that part of God which allows us to come into and feel his presence with us, empowering us.

I don't know what situations you may have where you need to be empowered, strengthened and consoled but there is power in praying the blessing of God on each one of us and for ourselves each day. The words in Corinthians are well known and powerful – 'May the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen.'

It's a prayer of peace and empowerment for the weak in our world and a blessing of strength for each of us. Amen.