

*Sermon preached by Revd Ross Fishburn
St Paul's Canterbury
Second Sunday in Easter
Sunday 24 April 2022*

I John, your brother who shares with you in the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus,
Revelation 1:9.

Well that's actually the verse that follows what we heard in second reading. It contains an odd combination, John shares with his audience *the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance*. That's what I want to think about today.

We don't share with him the persecutions that saw him on Patmos. Patmos was a small island, and John was exiled there because of his preaching of Jesus. What our preaching of Jesus mostly earns us is indifference and apathy.

But we do in a strange way share the patient endurance. Or at least we have in the last two years as we have suffered multiple lockdowns, the worst being for 111 days. Some of us think it's all over and the world is getting back to normal, or at least post-Covid normal. But ask anyone who has had Covid recently, or been a close contact, and they, **we**, might not be so sure. If you watch the Drum each night, you may recall hearing how the hospitality industry feels as we wait for restriction to be completely lifts. The live music industry is still feeling it hard. Every time a band member comes down with Covid, they will have to. Cancel a week's worth of performances. Ask the tourist industry, travellers, aged care workforce hospital workers and the list goes on and on. Patient endurance is still required. *Keep calm and carry on* signs would still be useful!

Indeed we could say this is a text for us here at St Paul's as we cope with the Vicar being sick still. It's hardly been normal

business since February, with her father's final illness and then his death, and then a normal week or two, and then 4 weeks of Covid that haven't finished yet. It creates something of a hiatus of leadership at a difficult time. It's been frustrating and your patient endurance and indeed your generosity to the Vicar and her domestic chaplain have been wonderful. But it's hard to keep the endurance patient!

So what does John have to teach us about patient endurance in a much darker and harder world. The world of the seven churches to whom he writes was indeed hard. The setting for this is probably a time of persecution at the end of the first century under the emperor Domitian. The early persecutions varied in severity and length but this one saw exile as much as it did martyrdom as the punishment for what was still an unusual religious belief, and one that went against the Roman way. [More of that in a moment.]

Anyway, John certainly knew about persecution as he was having his vision while in exile on Patmos. Yet to encourage his fellow Christians he says he shares with them in the kingdom and the patient endurance. OK, he wants them to patiently endure as he does, and the exotic visions he has of the ultimate victory of good over evil, of the light over the dark is presented to encourage them to that. But the kingdom? That seems out of context and counterintuitive. But in fact it is the key to the whole thing.

When I teach or preach about Jesus speaking of the kingdom of God in the gospels, I've often said we should translate it as "the reign of God" because that helps us bring it into our own context. But today I want to take seriously something the writer Jose Pagola says about it. You can also translate it as "***the Empire of God***". When you do that, it becomes clear why Jesus had a hard time from the Romans, and indeed why John was on Patmos. If you preach an Empire of this strange Jewish or Post-Jewish God,

the governing power is quite likely to think that you are working against the Empire of Caesar! You become a threat to the state. So John was indeed on Patmos, and shared in the experience of the persecution, and the Empire and the patient endurance. But that's not the end of it.

For John is sitting between the two senses of "Empire". He is persecuted because of the Empire of Rome, but he has patient endurance because of the Empire of God in Christ, and that second polarity is what his vision is all about.

So we read the first bit of this vision this morning: Jesus is the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, the ruler of the kingdoms of the earth. [Put that in your incense pot and smoke it Caesar!!]. Yes, he is a king, and emperor who rivals Caesar, but on the basis of a different victory which will be spelled out over 21 more chapters. This one goes on to call Jesus the First and the Last and the Living One. Jesus' endurance is far longer and more thorough-going than any Caesar can hope for. For Jesus died and now he lives, and the vision shows that his fundamental *original* victory over death is the source of the *final* victory in the last battle which he envisions is coming. Nothing can conquer the Lamb who was slain. That victory is fundamental and is simply to be played out to its natural conclusion.

Jesus is the Living One, now and always, and nothing can trump that.

So that why John says he shares with them in the persecution and the kingdom/Empire and the patient endurance, the present state of the seven church may feel hard and persecuted, but because they all share in the Empire of God, even in the midst of and despite the Empire of Caesar, even though it brings for them a time of trouble, it also means it is worth the patient endurance waiting for the ultimate victory of God to be played out.

OK, our situation isn't as harsh as that, but perhaps the lesson and the prompt for patient endurance might be helpful insofar as we need it.

Jesus is the Living One, and that is at the heart of our life even when it is uncomfortable or frustrating.

The hymn writer Brian Wren puts it better than me:

Christ is alive, let Christians sing,
his cross stands empty to the skies,
let streets and homes with praises ring,
love, drowned in death, shall never die.

That's the foundation of being Easter people, that's what undergirds patient endurance in whatever the situation where it is called for.