

St. Mary's Sermons

Romans 12:12 Text for the Year

New Living Translation (NLT)

You may not have picked up on this as yet, primarily because I have only just decided to do it! Although somewhat belatedly, as in previous years I have chosen, as our text for the year - *Romans 12 verse 12 - **Be joyful in hope, patient in trouble, faithful in prayer** -*.

After all that we have been through in the last couple of years, this verse seemed to be highly appropriate as we continue to face an uncertain future. It seems to sum up, very well, what our approach, as people of faith, should be whenever we are going through difficult or trying circumstances.

Firstly, Paul reminds us to be joyful in hope.

It would be so easy to become weighed down by the pressure of life and completely lose hope. As I said a couple of weeks ago, many people are growing increasingly weary and struggling to cope with life at the moment. Not just because of the pandemic, which seems to be dragging on with no end in sight, but also because of the squeeze on the economy through higher interest rates, spiralling inflation, the huge hike in fuel prices, and national insurance contributions, leaving many wondering how they are going to make ends meet.

As Christians we know, as Bill Johnson helpfully says, that **God is still in charge**. He is the one who ultimately has the last word. He is still **all mighty** and nothing is impossible for him. More than that, we know he is a good and loving heavenly father who has our best interests at heart. He is unchanging, and we can rely on him to fulfil his promises. We can be confident that, in his time, he will bring us through this difficult season of our lives. In the end we know that our hope in God will not disappoint us. Without doubt he is worth of our praise.

Knowing that, ultimately, God will bring us to the fulness of his kingdom - to paradise, where we will be free from all that spoils our lives here on earth. To live with him forever, also puts a completely different perspective on our lives on earth. We must not forget that this is our ultimate hope, that nothing that happens to us here on earth can ever spoil or destroy.

One of the problems that we face today is, that we have become far too comfortable with our lives as they were prior to the pandemic. The majority of people in our country enjoy a good standard of living, all the latest gadgets and the numerous opportunities that our wealth affords for us to enjoy life here on Earth so that heaven no longer appears to be so attractive. We have forgotten that this world is not our home.

Jesus, in the sermon on the mount, reminds us: *not to store up for ourselves treasure on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.* Personally, I find Jesus' conclusion to this section of teaching to be very challenging because he goes on to say, *for where your treasure is, your heart will be also.* Perhaps, one of the lessons we can all learn from this pandemic is, to not place too much store in the pleasures of this world and to learn again to value our eternal treasure.

Paul isn't saying anything new when he tells us to rejoice in hope. The bible is full of similar commands. This is a theme that David, in the Psalms, comes back to time and time again. Psalm 103 is just one example. *Bless the lord o my soul and forget not all his benefits.* So much to be grateful for, Sunday school chorus count your blessings and it will surprise you what the lord has done.

Nehemiah 8:10 tells us, *the joy of the lord is my strength.* Praising the lord for his goodness and love, especially when we don't feel like it, helps us to take our eyes off the problem and lifts our spirits.

Secondly, Paul reminds us to be patient in trouble.

We live in a society that wants instant answers, but this is not always the way that God works. It was 13 years, after Samuel anointed David, during which he encountered many problems before he actually ascended to the throne.

I don't consider myself to be a very patient person. When something goes wrong, I tend to huff and puff. I don't mean anything by it, it is just my way of coping! I'm sure like me, many of us have often prayed the prayer; *Lord, give me patience and give it me NOW!*

Often, it is when we can't resolve the problem ourselves, when we are forced to trust God that our faith in him grows. It is then that we see him at work in our lives in surprising ways and when we learn, in practice, that God is faithful, and we discover just what an amazing God we truly have. **Proverbs 3:5** *Trust in the lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding in all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your path.*

The parable of the sower warns us that the faith of some will be stubbed out by the problems of life.

Thirdly, Paul reminds us of the importance of being faithful in prayer.

Over the years, when things go wrong in life, I have learnt not to try and sort things out in my way, which is, of course, the natural thing to do. Doing things "my way" is the way of the world. I'm so pleased that Frank Sinatra's version of that song is no longer the most popular song at funerals! For me, it epitomises all that is wrong with our society. Instead, the best thing we can do is to ask for God's help in prayer. Just like any good father he delights when his children ask for his help.

Joseph Scriven, in his beautiful hymn, "*What a friend we have in Jesus*", which he wrote as a consequence of his fiancée being tragically killed in a horrific accident on the night before their wedding, got it so right when he wrote: "*O what peace we often forfeit, o what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer! Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged, take it to the lord in prayer.*"

That does not mean that God will always answer our prayer in the miraculous way that we might like (although sometimes he does). One prayer, that I have found that God always answers, is for the help of the Holy spirit to give me strength to cope with all that life throws in my direction, and to help me to go on trusting in God's plan and purpose for my life.

Whenever we think about an isolated verse of scripture, it is important that we consider its wider context. Romans 12 is a beautiful, but very challenging passage, in which Paul encourages us to give ourselves to God as living sacrifices. This is so counter cultural and counter intuitive, but Jesus teaches us that those who would lose their life for his sake will actually find it! He is aware that the age in which he lived, and subsequently not got any better, was evil. So, we are told not to allow the world to squeeze us into its way of thinking and behaving. We are not to copy the world's customs in relation to things like possession, moral standards, or sexual behaviour.

Instead, Paul encourages us to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. I can't remember where it was, but recently I read an article which suggested that the majority of Christian counselling that takes place today has to address the problem of low self-esteem.

It is essential that we know who we are and, that when we gave our lives to Christ, we died to the old way of thinking and living, and we are born again; we are now sons and daughters of a God who loves us so much that nothing can possibly separate us from His love.

We all know, in theory at least, that we are sons and daughters of God and adopted into his family. Jesus says something equally striking in John 15. *"I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know what his master is doing but I call you friends. Servants work to earn their masters favour, out of fear of the consequences, while a friend works of out of favour not wanting to disappoint their friend."* I have spent a lifetime trying to learn this lesson.

Otherwise, the enemy will easily be able to trick us into believing that we are useless, that we are not good enough for God, resulting in us not living in the freedom that Jesus won for us when he died on the cross and enabling us to fulfil our true potential. Another prayer we can pray with confidence is, *"Lord, please renew my mind, help me to see myself as you see me not as I see myself"*.

Our text for the year does not teach us anything that is new. Being joyful in hope, patient in trouble, faithful in prayer have been important topics that we have frequently talked about in the past couple of years. I make no apology for repeating them again as they are key themes that I believe can really help our faith to remain strong and continue to grow, not just during this pandemic, but can also be a sure anchor whenever we encounter the storms of life.