10th June 2018

**2 Corinthians 4.13–5.1**

"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:

Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"

That was Shelley, writing in 1818 with a poetic vision inspired by a monumental figure in the British Museum. Shelley's Ozymandias is Ramesses II, king of Egypt around 1270 BC, and his giant head dominates the space at the museum. It was taken from the temple in Thebes. Rameses II, one of the most powerful pharaohs in ancient Egypt, built huge monuments, temples and statues boasting of his achievements. But the inscription on the base of his ruined statue says it all: the name remains, but the power – and pretty much everything that went with it – has vanished. This is true of all monuments and those who build them. All the things that human beings make, accomplish, and pride ourselves on, have a limited shelf life. They do not last for ever.

We often have grandiose ideas of what will last. In Germany in 1933, Hitler boasted of a ‘Thousand Year Reich’. By May 1945, the system was in ruins. History constantly reminds us that human buildings, institutions and systems, however imposing, are not permanent. What will truly last?

As we think about the next ten years in this place what part can we, as a local Christian community, and each of us as individuals, play in creating a lasting Christian legacy? What will last, especially at a time when Christian churches seem to be closing and shutting up shop at the same rate as High Street shops such as the House of Fraser and Marks and Spencer are closing stores due to the times changing and the impact of internet shopping.

In contrast, we hear Paul say that those things that are eternal cannot be seen and will last forever. They belong to a ‘different realm or dimension’ – what Jesus calls ‘the kingdom of God/heaven’. Sci-fi fans can often explain or give examples of ‘different realms/dimensions’. And perhaps you need imagination to have faith and perhaps the lack of faith in our current society is down to a failure of imagination.

In our material and linear world of time and space, cause and effect and empirical reasoning we can struggle to get our heads around this. Indeed, increasing numbers of people are rejecting the idea that there is an eternal realm, that there is a God. They think it’s wish fulfilment or a fantasy, comparable to a children’s fairy story.

I’m sure you know Hans Christian Andersen’s tale of *The Emperor’s New Clothes*. The story turns on the fact that the tricksters rely on people’s unwillingness not to appear foolish, so they pretend to see the invisible clothes and comment how nice the Emperor looks – even though he is stark naked! – until, of course, a young boy exposes the con – ‘but the Emperor hasn’t got any clothes on’!

When Paul asserts that what is invisible is eternal and will truly last how can we demonstrate that he is not involved in a cosmic con trick?

Paul of course bases his belief in the eternal realm because of the resurrection of Jesus. Death was not the end: God raised Jesus from the dead. He witnessed it. He was contemporary with the apostles who were dying for their belief and experience of the Risen Jesus.

This is very personal and immediate to Paul in this letter of 2 Corinthians. Last week we looked briefly at the background to this letter to the Corinthians. Most scholars believe it was written from a prison in Ephesus, on the west coast of modern day Turkey, to the church that Paul had founded in Corinth, then a bustling cosmopolitan city in northern Greece. But after a successful ministry in Corinth and Ephesus where people had come to faith and miracles and wonders had happened Paul experiences a number of crushing setbacks. He hears that the church in Corinth are angry at him for asking them for money to support the Jerusalem church who are struggling with persecution and famine. They have also decided that he is not a true apostle and have rejected him in favour of other leaders.

Now he is banged up in prison in Ephesus for causing a riot as the evil powers react to his mission there and bite back. In prison he is feeling neglected, and utterly depressed and broken. As we saw last week he describes himself as despairing of life, having received the sentence of death, but then he adds that this happened that he might not rely on himself but on God, who raises the dead.

*He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again*. 2 Cor 1.10

In these opening chapters he identifies with Jesus, as a true follower of Christ. He was prepared to endure sufferings like his Lord, for the sake of his beliefs and the gospel. But now he is at an all-time low. This is Paul, the great apostle, who started the church as we know it, feeling as though it was all in vain, crushed, perplexed, ready for death. Yet somehow, and the New Testament doesn’t tell us how, Paul turns a corner. So, he writes in the verses we looked at last week in chapter four:

***7****But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.****8****We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;****9****persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroye*d (4.7-9)

Just like the resurrection when you are at your lowest point, when you are admitting defeat, God comes and does the impossible. So now Paul can say at the start of our reading today: ***13****It is written: ‘I believed; therefore I have spoken.’[*[*b*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Corinthians+4&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-28873b)*] Since we have that same spirit of[*[*c*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Corinthians+4&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-28873c)*] faith, we also believe and therefore speak,****14****because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself.*

He believes in the God who raises the dead. He has known that personally himself.

Maybe you feel hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down. Hold on to hope. Hope in the God who raises the dead and gives us grace to endure and overcome. It is not the end of the story. The end of the story is always with God for those who trust in Him.

Paul goes on to write:

***16****Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.****17****For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.****18****So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

As June settles in, and summer feels like a reality rather than wishful thinking, we might be turning our thoughts to summer holidays – and for many that will mean a plane flight to another part of the world. With the advent of cheap airlines and bargain tickets the possibilities for travel, for going to new places, and looking at the world beyond our backyards, have grown and grown. We long to see things for ourselves.

Whether you [agree or disagree](http://www.theweek.co.uk/94066/heathrow-expansion-what-difference-will-it-make) with the Heathrow expansion plan, it’s difficult to deny that more and more of us want to see other places. We want to experience other cultures and interact with distant towns and cities, go to places that look and feel different to wherever we’re from. Maybe it’s an expression of the restlessness of the human spirit – that longing for a different home.

We want to see for ourselves.

And whilst our desire to see things for ourselves is perfectly acceptable, it’s interesting that in 2 Corinthians 4.18, Paul puts the emphasis on exactly the opposite: not physically seeing for ourselves. [[1]](#endnote-1)

As Christians, we are invited to look for the permanent and lasting; to ‘see’ the eternal things; to see for ourselves the invisible and everlasting. As much as we desire to look at the wonders of this world, we lift our gaze and long to ‘see’ the next.

So, Paul continues:

***5****For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.****2****Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, (5.1-2)*

Paul’s image of ‘a house not made with hands’ will have reminded more listeners that Scripture outlawed idols (Exodus 20.4; Deuteronomy 5.8), mocking them as ‘the work of human hands’ (Psalms 115.4; 135.15; Isaiah 37.19). Corinth teemed with statues and temples of the gods, including the imperial family, but the Jewish Scriptures of the Corinthian Christians said that even Solomon’s Temple could not contain the God of heaven and earth (see also 1 Kings 8.27-30). Monuments to human vanity were outwardly visible but would vanish. God’s eternal house is inward and invisible. Both as individuals (1 Corinthians 6.19) and as a community (1 Corinthians 3.16; 2 Corinthians 6.16), the Corinthian Christians are already the temple of God.

 Many Christians today have a similar reverence for buildings used for worship, while others see the gathering of the Christian community as the important thing.

Buildings will always be important – they can act as a focus for belonging and can either hinder or help community and worship and witness. But they mustn’t be idolized – made into something that is more important than it should be. How do Paul’s words help us shape our witness today?

Paul seems to have a sense that no matter what happens everything will ultimately be all right, even though it may not be all right at the moment. In another of his prison letters to the Philippians, he talks of having a peace that passes understanding. Often people only discover this in tragic situations, often in the valley of despair. Tim Keller[[2]](#endnote-2) uses a metaphor for it. If you have ever been on the coast in the storm and seen the waves come in and hot the rocks sometimes the waves are so large that they cover the rock and you think ‘that’s the end of that rock’. But when the waves receded, there it is still. It hasn’t budged an inch. A person who feels the peace that passes understanding is like that. No matter what is thrown at you, you know it will not make you lose your footing.

Paul was the classic example. Beaten, flogged, imprisoned, shipwrecked – wave after wave. Yet whatever his circumstances he retains a peace in God. All the waves of life couldn’t break him – though they nearly did. He has readjusted his sight to look not on what is temporary, what is seen – in other words on the fluctuating circumstances of this life. But on what is unseen and eternal.

This is so completely different from what you find if you walk into any bookstore and go to the section on anxiety, worry and dealing with stress. Here is what you will never see: none of these books will ever say, ‘are you stressed, unhappy or anxious? Let’s start dealing with that by asking the big questions: what is the meaning of life? What are you really here for? What is life all about? Where have you come from and where are you going? What should you spend your time doing? Never!

Contemporary books go right to relaxation techniques and to the work rest balance. For example they will say that every so often you should go sit on a beach, look at the surf and just bracket out worrying and thinking about things. Or they will give you thought control techniques about dealing with negative thoughts and emotions, guilty feelings and so forth.

Why don’t contemporary books on stress and anxiety tell you to respond to it by doing deep thinking about life? It is because our Western secular culture operates without any answers to those questions. If there is no God we are here essentially by accident, and when we die, we are only remembered for a short while, if we are lucky. One day the sun will die and all that has ever been will come to nothing. If this is the nature of things, then is it any wonder that secular books for people under stress never ask them to ask about questions such as what are you here for? Instead they use diversionary techniques and advise you not to think too hard but to relax and seek pleasure.

Paul is saying that Christian peace and hope operates in exactly the opposite way. Christian hope and peace comes from ***not thinking less but thinking more, and more intensely about the big issues of life***. Extending our vision. Seeing beyond the temporary affairs of this life to what is eternal, what will last, what is secure. Both here and elsewhere in his writings he says whatever you’re suffering it’s not worth comparing with the glory that awaits us.

If you’re thinking well I’m suffering now – what I really need is some comfort. Take it from Paul who almost died in prison who thought about Jesus suffering and dying for him, enduring suffering so that someday he would take you to himself and wipe away every tear from your eyes.

If so, then there is all the comfort in the world. If not, then you’re stuck here, and this is all the happiness you will ever know or tragically not. Either Jesus is on the throne and we believe in a God who raises the dead and rules over all things – or this is as good as it gets folks.

Where’s your sight? What are you looking for?

***16****Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.****17****For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.****18****So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

1. *Fiona Dorman is currently an Education Officer at Bristol Cathedral, and a freelance writer and educator.* [*https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2018/95-may-june-2018-b/proper-5/postscript*](https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2018/95-may-june-2018-b/proper-5/postscript) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Tim Keller, Walking with god through Pain and Suffering, Hodder, 2013, pp297-299 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)