

Stable in all storms

In [Christ] we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:11-23 ESV)

To keep a tent or mast or awning stable in the wind, we often use guy lines that are anchored to something solid and thus we have stability – things stay up and do what we want them to do. Should the guy lines become loose or come away from their anchorage, then the object is unstable and in a storm could fall or fly away.

I have that image – that of guy lines giving us stability – from time to time when I think of people. With increasing opportunities for travel in our modern world, yet many people are still living in the regions of their birth, we all have invisible guy lines that keep us upright and relatively stable – a home to live in, a history of parents and family and nation, and an honour board (so to speak) of our deeds that can go with us – our reputation. Cut any of these guy lines – our homes destroyed or our deeds either condemn us or are meaningless to others or death comes close to us and takes away loved ones or friends, and we are destabilised, blowing in the wind, not as secure as before, in turmoil, no longer feeling safe because we're in a storm of some sort. That is one reason we should identify with refugees – those who have had most if not all of their guy lines broken or taken from them.

Around this time of the year the majority of Christians world-wide pause and reflect and remember guy lines that haven't become loose but have actually severed, snapped, broken – the relationships that have ended by death, the people who are no longer with us in this world, whose bodies we have returned to the earth. Often it is our oldest guy ropes that have gone, the ones who have given us a place in the world, shaped the way we see things – the older generation – our grandparents and parents – and we're less stable initially but gradually the rocking subsides and while weakened perhaps, we regain our stability and go on. The world says, 'Well, at least we have our memories to help us'. Christians say, 'We have Christ to help us and those who are in Christ, we will see again'.

I know which one is more stable!

The world says, 'No you don't. You only believe that you do.'

And of course the world is right. We are talking about knowledge and experience and how we know things and the basis for what we regard as truth as we both stare down at our loved ones who have died – and try as we might, we can't revive them. The world says that the experience of death trumps everything – there is no life after it, live the best you can with that truth. Christians say that the experience of death is just part of all of our life that has been lived in a relationship with Jesus who once himself died but who is now alive – and so even death is seen in terms of the relationship with Jesus. The advantage the world has is that its message matches what our senses say – dead is dead. For Christians there is a struggle over whom to believe – our senses, yes, dead is dead – or words said to us by parents maybe, by pastors and Sunday School teachers, by

fellow Christians, words read in the Bible, words about the Word made flesh himself, words from Jesus who says such things as: *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. (Matthew 5:4 ESV)* and *I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die (John 11:25-26 ESV)* and *I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world (John 16:33 ESV).*

The Apostle Paul in his travels and pastoral work spent most of his time giving people guy ropes to help them stay upright and not be blown away by the storms of life. In his letter to the Church at Ephesus, a place he spent much time being a pastor (scholars debate whether this letter is written before or after his work there), Paul uses such terms as ‘inheritance’ – in Christ you have received an inheritance – and of course there’s a double meaning that it is ours because Christ died for us but we only will see it – it is already ours in faith – when we die. God has planned this for the believer – our salvation is not an accident or an after-thought – and it is always one of others who are saved before us telling us about Jesus and so on. So there are always sequences here – it’s the same in life – our parents taught us how to hold a knife and fork, manners, and how to drive the car – so older Christians praise God and the next generation learns to do so. And this isn’t a mind game or just a Christian custom but because of the storms in life we receive the Holy Spirit who guarantees our inheritance. People often look for the Holy Spirit in feelings – being close to God or something – but Paul rarely talks about experiences and when he does it is usually about struggle and suffering (see 2 Corinthians 11) because the marks of the Holy Spirit are: 1. faith that Jesus is Lord and 2. our repentance of sins – for what is he to be Lord over but us? – and what is Jesus to do but rescue us from our bodies of death? So sin and death are our lot in life but they are not to define us, shape us, control us. We are not to be their puppet dancing to their strings but instead be stable in Christ, with him as our chief guy rope – and Jesus gives us other ropes to support us – but should they all fail or be taken away – he will not.

Pastors don’t rejoice in death – though it is a going home for those in Christ – there is always sadness because our loved one is not with us and we are bereft. However I think all pastors do quietly rejoice when they see faith in those who mourn – hope in tears – a looking forward to heaven rather than just a looking back to memories – and like Paul gave thanks for the Christians at Ephesus, so pastors do praise God and give thanks even in the face of death because it is only Jesus who can give such hope in this world. Remember the world thinks religious believers – and possibly Christian believers especially – are most foolish.

And yet the mystery remains that Christianity keeps growing no matter how much people try to kill it, cut the guy ropes, it in fact remains and even strengthens. That is simply because ‘Christ is risen!’ and he is present with his people. Christianity isn’t about ethics first and foremost or about some special knowledge but about living with Jesus – each day – and also dying with Jesus – each day – and one of those days physical death will occur (unless Jesus returns first).

John Donne (1572 – 1631) wrote a series of meditations part of one is now the well known poem ‘No man is an island’.

*No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were:
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind,
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.*

When death comes severing guy ropes, all those around are less secure, less upright, more prone to ups and downs, as we struggle to go on. We are interconnected in all sorts of communities and ways. That’s how God

has worked this world and he continues to support us by linking us with Christ. In a congregation – filled with people who often would not normally be together – who are different in their likes, dislikes, politics, tastes, backgrounds – who might not even like each other – there is nevertheless a bond – not our mortality (we all will die) but our faith. Jesus fills all and is in all of our relationships to season and enrich and purify – so that we may live – and live well. And when that living involves walking into the valley of the shadow of death we are still not alone for brothers and sisters in Christ go with us as far as they can while Jesus never leaves us. When we recall those who have died at these sorts of times of course we can remember and cherish them and what they did for us but most of all, we focus on Jesus who held them and who holds us. That's how we live – no matter for whom the bells tolls.

Jesus will never leave us bereft and destroyed by the storms – not even death itself.