

Church Family Newsletter 26th May 2020

Realism or escapism

When we get together with our friends, we often have some interesting conversations. I remember some time ago a group of us were discussing the answer to an interesting question. Although it sounds a bit morbid, the question was 'what epitaph would you want to have on your headstone?' The words chosen by my friends were quite serious. The words I chose were 'is it safe to come out yet?' Many a true word spoken in jest as they say.

At a more serious level the words indicate a natural desire to avoid trouble and also a defensiveness which is very common and sometimes deep seated. In the history of the church the whole question of the believer's relationship with the world was a significant issue. In the medieval period those who were supposed to be really spiritual were the monks. They certainly believed in cutting themselves off from the world in order to be more spiritual and in order to avoid an ungodly world. They seemed to disregard what Jesus said in his prayer for the disciples in John 17.15 'I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one'.

Jesus tells the disciples in very plain words in John 16.33 'In the world you have tribulation but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world'. Having established that we must not hide ourselves away and having established that we shall face tribulation we ask ourselves – what can be gained in the experience of tribulation? There are two particular purposes. Firstly, there is the increase in Christian character and secondly there is the increase in faith.

As Christians we realise we ought to change and also we sincerely desire to change but when we encounter tribulation we have to change. The apostle Paul puts it this way in Romans 5.3 'we rejoice in our sufferings knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us'.

Also, tribulation itself will increase our faith. 1 Peter 1.7 says 'though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials so that the genuineness of your faith more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire may redound to praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ'. There is no such thing as an untested faith. But Jesus does not just mention tribulation. He doesn't leave it there. He says 'I have overcome the world'.

The apostle John elaborates on this. He says in 1 John 5.5 'who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God'. If we hide away this is escapism. If we live in the world as faithful followers of Christ this is realism. The apostle John gives us the reason for our confidence in 1 John 4.4 which says 'he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world'