

“Let light shine in the darkness”

I am part of the Missions Committee of the Presbytery of Montreal. And on that committee are at least two women. One woman is part of a group called ROJEP, Réseau oecuménique pour la justice et la paix (or something of that nature). And the other woman is the part-time chaplain—Presbyterian chaplain—at McGill University. Judy Berlyn and Jill Foster.

Well, Judy explains about ROJEP that it is an organization, largely French-speaking, which discusses various social issues, or issues of justice of peace, but doesn't actually do anything. That's her evaluation of ROJEP. It's a great learning experience. However, nothing actually is done on the basis of this information, this sharing of knowledge.

Well, the Presbyterian chaplain at McGill—the Presbyterian chaplain—Jill Foster, was asked whether she would serve as the Presbyterian representative on ROJEP. And her response was that she wanted to do something that was a little more “hands-on”, because she is part of a number of organizations, one of which you may have heard of, called the Peacemakers. These are groups that actually make themselves present in situations where there is conflict or where concerns of justice need to be brought to the attention of the wider community. So Jill favours that organization—Peacemakers—rather than ROJEP.

Well, our passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is just a snippet from a much larger letter, which tackles a variety of issues. But, throughout the letter—Paul's second letter to the Corinthians—one has the very definite sense that Paul explains his life, understands his life, and lives his life, in terms of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Lord. Everything that Paul does springs out of that understanding—and not only understanding, but experience.

I'll name some of the issues that he deals with in his letter. Right off the bat, he remarks—“Praise be to God, the God of all mercies...” the One who offers compassion to us, in such a way that we can be a source of comfort to others. And then he explains what is behind this. He wants these Corinthians to know what a difficult time he had in Asia (present-day Turkey), where, he says, he received the very sentence of death (it appeared), in order, as he said, to find the reality of the One who raises the dead. He was in great grief, because he could not find—among other reasons for his sorrow—he couldn't find his fellow worker, Titus. Titus, eventually, did show up, and that was a great source of comfort to him.

So Paul understood his life in terms of sharing in the reality of Jesus Christ, who was crucified. His own experience of being abandoned, of having the very sentence of death put upon him, was a bit like sharing that experience of crucifixion. But, on the other hand, he found comfort; he found comfort from the arrival—the eventual arrival—of Titus, and better days ahead, which took him, eventually, to Corinth and elsewhere.

Well, our lives do not need simply to talk about the comfort of God. Our lives can be an experience of the comfort of God. Certainly, our lives have their own share of grief and sorrow—a grief that we can take to God, and find God's response, and God's comfort in response to that. And, because of the comfort we receive, in the midst of our need, we can also be a source of comfort to others in their need.

The Book of Job is a book I spent a good deal of time studying, some years ago, as part of the fulfilment of some academic requirements. Well, the Book of Job is, in many ways, a long

lament. Or a good part of it is a lament, sometimes in very sharp tones; but, nevertheless, a lament. But that lament receives an answer. And we ourselves can feel like Job, at times. But, when we make our prayers known to God, we can find responses to those prayers—comfort, sometimes in the form of other people, just like Paul found comfort by the arrival of Titus.

So, that's one issue that is brought to the attention of the Corinthians, in that letter that Paul writes to them. Another issue that he responds to, from their side, is remarks that he has heard that question his sincerity or his genuineness. For example, he had made plans to go to Corinth; and he didn't show up. So what was the reason behind it? Was it simply that Paul decided, "Well, this is not convenient; I will go some other time"? Well, he explained that there was something much deeper at issue; and that something was the well-being of the Corinthian congregation themselves. He felt that these people needed to work through a particular issue before he arrived. Also, it seemed as though Paul was forever having to justify himself, and say that he is a true apostle. Apparently, some of the Christian communities that he went to wanted some sort of letters of recommendation, from other Christian communities.

But, from his point of view, despite all this questioning of who he was, his role in the wider mission of God—despite all that—he was convinced that the faith that these people had—had come to—was part of their lives now—was as a result of his preaching of the gospel. And, in fact, he said to them, "You may have many leaders, or people who come in; but you don't have many fathers." In fact, he was a "father" to these Corinthians. He was the one who first preached the gospel to them, in such a way that they heard, and responded. Faith is the resurrection-sign, in this case; and the sign of crucifixion is more of that questioning that Paul had to endure from the very community to which he had preached.

Faith is such that it is like seeing the glory of God in the face of Christ. And it's a glory that shines into our lives in such a way that our lives are transformed. And this faith is a reality, such that, even though our earthly life, as Paul says, eventually crumbles, becomes nothing, we have this heavenly dwelling, or this dwelling in heaven, not made with [human] hands, that is our destiny, our ultimate destination.

Faith, then, is the resurrection-sign in the midst of all this questioning of Paul. And faith is the resurrection-sign for us. The Christian faith is not just talk; it is not just doctrine that we might accept. It is this miracle, this product of the resurrection, which is faith, by which the Spirit transforms our lives, and is like a first installment of what God wishes for us in the resurrection to eternal life.

Now, another issue that Paul raises with these Corinthian Christians is their own congregational life, so to speak. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he, in fact, had described, at some length, some of these issues. There was a case—from his point of view—of immorality; a case which, in Jewish eyes, would appear as incest. And he had written pretty strong words about that, which had, evidently been communicated to the erring party, shall we say. Well, these Corinthian Christians had to deal with this issue on an ongoing basis. In fact, they had to deal with a number of issues affecting their congregational life, and that could have a negative effect on that life. But he was confident—Paul was confident—that, by the wisdom that God had imparted to them, they could make decisions; they could deal with the issues that came before them.

Well, nothing has changed, as far as our own experience. Whether it's congregational life, or whether it's life in the world—in the wider world, whether the national world, or international world—issues of justice, issues of dealing with things that need to be dealt with are ever before us. God ultimately is the one who can overturn things which are unjust, or things which are harmful to human society.

Now, pardon me for saying this, but, in my own view, the latest hurrah over the abandoning of the gun registry, was, to my mind, a sign of a lack of responsiveness to people on the other side of the issue. Of course, the whole gun registry thing began a number of years ago after that massacre at the École Polytechnique. Perhaps it [i.e. the creation of the gun registry] wasn't justified. And many hunters will tell you that they don't want any such thing [as a gun registry]. But, on the other hand, there was this experience of these people that brought into being this gun registry. And couldn't there have been some effort to reach out to these people? To my mind, there's a case where the fabric of community is not quite what it should be; and the disunity there, needs to be addressed.

And, of course, there are issues in church communities, including our own, where we need to address issues, in such a way that God's righteousness and justice are part of our life together.

Now, in this second letter of Paul to the Corinthians, he also talks about a collection. Now, the Corinthian Christians were people who had a very positive view of themselves, shall we say. They felt that they were already reigning, so to speak, in God's kingdom. They had such a wonderful wisdom and knowledge and spiritual gifts, of various sorts. And yet, it all seemed to revolve around themselves.

And so, the apostle Paul had a practice that was a daring and bold one, on his own part, with all the churches he served or all the churches he established. And that was that he did not ask for those people to support them—the people amongst whom he existed, at that particular time. Rather, he looked for those Christians to help establish or benefit other Christian communities. And so, for example, the Philippian church, which is in the north part of the Greek peninsula, supported him during his efforts further south. And he was calling upon the Corinthian Christians to take part in this collection on behalf of the church in Jerusalem.

Well, sometimes, I have the impression that we still carry that—sort of—commercial view of Church: the Church exists to serve us; we give money in order to pay for service of us. But, as Paul depicts the Church, the Church is, ultimately a mission. And, when we give to the Church, it's not simply for ourselves in receiving service. It's actually for the Church's work in the wider world, and for the strength of the Church's witness here and beyond our community and beyond our area. So the cross that Paul might have experienced was this attitude that it's all centred around us. But the resurrection shows itself when people sow, not sparingly, but generously, and reap generously, as a consequence.

The Christian faith is not just about discussing issues. It's about participating in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. In the midst of difficulties, we can find comfort, and be a comfort. In the midst of questioning about what we receive, the message we receive, faith can arise, a transformative faith. In the midst of our own congregational life and the wider community, there are issues that need to be discussed and dealt with in a positive way. When those things *are* dealt with, that is certainly a sign of the resurrection-power, the wisdom, that

God has to share with us. And, finally, when, as people, we are able to share with one another—not only buy things for ourselves, but give in such a way that the mission of God in the world is furthered—then there is a sign of the resurrection also.

So may our Christian life be not only in words but in the very experience of communion with our crucified and risen Lord, who has sent into our midst his Holy Spirit.