

## The 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity, Book of Common Prayer, 2021

St Paul may not have taken many prisoners with his passionate ministry and writing but he was a *master* of contrasts. Today we hear that the ‘letter’ ‘killeth’ but the ‘spirit’ ‘giveth life’. The law, the written law, legalism: diminishes, distorts and ultimately deals in death. Whereas the Spirit – the living way of the living God who has revealed Himself in Jesus and lives among us as the Spirit, leads us into *life* – fullness of life *now*, life that *gives* life to everyone around us, life *eternal* forever with God.

St Paul sometimes gets bad press because his words have been misused by racists or misogynists to cloak their poison in religion. What we actually have in St Paul (if only we would look closer) is a man on fire with love and for whom every tiny part of life – including every fibre of his own being – is fizzing with the threshold and anticipation of *‘glory’*.

St Paul's letters can only be understood by those who are not reading them in order to condemn him, or those who are reading them in the hope of finding an ally for this or that opinion. St Paul's letters can only be understood by those who hear them or read them with (at the forefront of their mind): here speaks and writes a man whose ears are still ringing from the Damascus road. Here is a man whose *whole* life now tingles with the blinding light, who is still (figuratively speaking) blinking and groping and open-mouthed in wonder from that moment when Jesus appeared to him on the road and said, 'Saul, Saul why persecutest thou me?'.

When we realise that every subsequent day of St Paul's earthly life, and every word he wrote, is the *hangover* of that totally defining, jaw-dropping moment of glory, then we begin to *hear*. Then Jesus begins to unblock our eyes and unstop our ears (like He did in today's Gospel), and we begin to understand what S. Paul is really saying when he says that God has made us – you and me! - ministers of the new covenant (in Jesus' blood).

Ministers of a covenant that is not *legal* but *relational*; not *written* on objects but *personal*; about our *living relationship* with God through the Holy Spirit, not the following of some rules. And, St Paul says today, the first covenant of the law was glorious enough that Moses' face shone so the people couldn't even bear to look on it. How much *more* glorious must this final covenant of endless life and love be?! And we who are washed in the Blood of the Lamb at Baptism, we who feast on this sacrifice of the true Lamb of God, His Body and Blood of the New Testament – we are His ministers. *You and I* are called to do just the same as those naughty people in the Gospel (or perhaps that was Jesus' intention all along, who knows?) to 'publish it' 'a great deal'. To take our shining faces and hearts full of love, eyes blinking from the glory that is promised us, and take it out into the world, and share it.

Paul Ricoeur the 20<sup>th</sup> Century French Philosopher's approach has been called by some a kind of hermeneutical cycle – some have sketched it as: you have to believe to understand and you have to understand to believe. And that's quite right of course. You can't understand without belief, and you can't believe without understanding. You can't look at these things coldly, legalistically. The writings of St Paul, life with Jesus, have simply to be entered into if we are ever to begin to see what they're about. It's a cycle that can't be broken, and that can't be begun except for simply stepping aboard and carrying on-through, like stepping on a moving merry-go-round. So let's go with St Paul, reeling from a glimpse of glory, let's open our eyes and ears to what he's really about, let's open our eyes and ears to what Jesus is about to do *now* by His Holy Spirit, with our prayers, and this bread and wine, and let's keep them open as we leave this altar and go back into the world for another week, eyes open to glory and what God is doing in our lives.