

This is one of a series of my reflections based on the banners that are hanging in St Peters and St Paul's Church, Aylesford. There are 8 banners:

GOD Listens	GOD Enables
GOD Loves	GOD Provides
GOD Creates	GOD Encourages
GOD Cares	GOD Lives

Other banner reflections will follow but in the meantime a printed version of the series of reflections is available in the church.



GOD ENCOURAGES

In a sermon I came across once, by a retired Methodist minister, the preacher began by saying that he really must buy a new bath mat. He said that there wasn't much wrong with the old one. After a wash it comes up lovely and fluffy. But after a few hours it develops a huge crease down the middle, something to do with the foam backing he thought. "Well," he claims, "that is a bit like me really." He writes, "I confess to my sins but I find myself falling into the same weaknesses over and over again." "It is comforting," he continues, "to know that St Paul had the same problem. Paul tells the Christians in Rome that he has the desire to do what is good, but he cannot carry it out. He finds himself doing not the good he wants to do but the evil he doesn't want to do. It is rather like one of those supermarket trolleys, you push in one direction and it goes in another!"

So what are we to do? Is Jesus the one who answers all our questions and solves all our problems? There are optimistic Christians who really do like to think so. Yet detailed instructions and guidelines about life go against faith in Christ that is about freedom, at times exciting and joyful, at other times worrying and frightening. Our Christian journey uses a road that turns corners, our route is uncertain and unclear. It becomes one of discovery and we are bound to go wrong.

Jesus does not provide us with quick and perfect answers but with a better set of questions. When Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive a brother who made life hard for him he was hoping for clearcut guidelines. Instead Jesus told him that the question was wrong. "How many times," Jesus asks Peter, "do you want God to forgive you?" Jesus' promise to be with us is not as our tour guide, but as a strength and encourager that helps us face up to challenge, to difficulties, to problems in this very uncertain world. The freedom to think, argue, believe, decide, pray, worship and act does not come gift wrapped with detailed instructions. Partnership is the key to being a Christian, a partnership with Jesus and, through, Jesus, to his Father and to each other – a partnership built in the Holy Spirit.

People in the Old Testament saw God as detached from their world, not able to share in their circumstances and situations they face. When he did intervene, often turning their lives upside down, they couldn't cope. They didn't know how to relate to him. Paul, believing in a less detached, more accessible God, writes to the Romans, "May God the source of hope, fill you with all joy and peace, by means of your faith in him so that your hope will continue to grow in the power of the Holy Spirit."

In one context, in a great sweep of power Isaiah tells us that God measures the waters in the hollow of his hands, the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance; earth's inhabitants are like grasshoppers before him making the rulers of the world as nothing. In another context, Isaiah says that God will feed his flock like a shepherd, gather the lambs in his arms, give power to the faint, strengthen the powerless with the strength of all those who wait upon God being renewed so that they shall mount up with wings like eagles, running and not be weary, walk and not faint.

Doesn't this sound so encouraging to us from this all-powerful God; encouragement to take up a challenge; encouragement to persevere; encouragement to take the first tentative steps; encouragement to try again; encouragement to change; encouragement to grow in faith?

The Methodist preacher's sermon went on to say that a man was eating his packed lunch at work. "Oh dear," he said, as he looked at his sandwiches that, yet again, were sardine. "Well," said his mate, "why don't you ask your missus to pack up something different?" "That's the trouble," he replied, "I made them myself!" The remedy was in his own hands. In the same way our

real answer lies in a long and may be painful look at ourselves to see which part of us is out of shape, distorted, in pain. Most important it will help show God can help us focus back on what is good, helping to look at the creases, as it were, and encouraging us to iron them out!

If we fail, God's love will not. We sometimes find it hard to accept that God loves us while we are painfully aware of our weaknesses and lost opportunities. Paul wrote that we should run straight the race to win but he also adds that God is working in you. To know that I am loved deeply, though and through, gives me enough encouragement and courage to carry on and reject my failures, fears, weaknesses and stubborn pride and to try again to build things for God. This is what his encouragement is all about. What fantastic things we can have from a personal partnership with Christ, a personal partnership based on faith and Christian love.