

Galatians 6:1-16**Bear one another's burdens**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the defining visible marks of a Christian community is caring for one another. I emphasise 'visible' because this is the bit that the world around us mostly sees. Now the Christian church is found wherever there are believers who gather. And we know that there will be believers wherever the gospel is rightly taught, and the sacraments rightly administered. But that's not the bit the world sees. A non-believer wouldn't know the right teaching of the gospel or right administration of the sacraments. But as Jesus told the apostles in John 13, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." The most visible mark of the church to those outside of it is how we care for one another.

In our Epistle reading from Galatians today, that caring takes the form of restoring a fellow believer who has been overcome by sin. We are told to flee temptation, but at times temptation catches up with us and we do fall into sin. This is a reality of our life in this world where we are still awaiting the fullness of the new creation. And so, St Paul encourages the godly ones, the spiritual ones, to gently and humbly restore those who fall into sin. And even these godly ones who are helping an entangled Christian brother or sister should be on the lookout lest they too succumb to temptation.

We must recognise the potential for any believer to stumble and fall. This is why we are called to bear one another's burdens. This kind of care is worth the risk, and it is precisely how the law of Christ is fulfilled. This is how we love one another. This is how the world sees that we are disciples of Jesus Christ. And as we care for one another in this way, we're also told that we are responsible for our own conduct. This might seem a bit odd after all this talk about bearing one another's burdens. But Paul is reminding us of the reality that when we fall into sin, it is we alone who bear the guilt.

We cannot use the excuse that our community of faith didn't hold us up properly. But that's not then an excuse in the other direction that we don't have to try too hard to help a stumbling brother or sister because ultimately their sin is on them. It's both at the same time. If another believer is overcome by sin, we gently and humbly help them back on the right path. And all the while being careful that we don't fall into sin ourselves. We are aware of each other's burdens so that we can help others, and we are aware of our own so that we can seek the help we need.

To engage in bearing one another's burdens requires each of us to know our own weaknesses, our own temptations that usually get the better of us. To live in the way Paul is describing here in Galatians six means knowing our need for others, and ultimately our need for Christ crucified for our sin. This is the sort of healthy self-awareness that is so important in the Christian life. And this prevents us from falling into the trap of pride, of thinking we can do it on our own. Our particular translation today puts verse three quite bluntly, "If you think you are too important to help someone, you are only fooling yourself. You are not that important."

Such an attitude of conceited self-importance leads to two fundamental failures of Christian love. First, it brings the refusal to bear the burdens of others, for that would be a task too menial, too lowly, for a person of such great importance. Second, it leaves them suffering under their own burdens because they refuse to acknowledge that they could possibly need help from anyone. That would be an admission of weakness. But that is precisely what we need to admit. We cannot achieve it on our own. We need others to help bear our burdens, and we definitely need Christ to bear the weight of our sin on the cross. And this helps us have compassion on anyone else who also needs the forgiveness that only comes through Christ.

We most certainly all have burdens, and God does not intend for us to carry them by ourselves in isolation from our brothers and sisters. Now our burdens may differ in size and shape. They may be the burden of temptation and the consequences of being caught up in sin. They may be the burden of sickness and poor health. They may be the burden of broken relationships and disjointed families. They may be the burden of financial struggles and uncertain employment. They could be a host of other things, but no Christian is exempt from burdens. Creation too is burdened by sin and awaits the fullness of the new creation in Christ Jesus, where it will be set free from its bondage to decay.

We all await the return of our Redeemer in glory who will set all things right and bring final judgment on sin. And as we live in this time between the cross and the final judgment, St Paul encourages us to not grow weary of doing good. Living the Christian life, this life of love for one another, of bearing one another's burdens, can be tiresome. We don't often see results, especially not immediate ones, and that too can be a temptation to live not in hope but in despair. But we are called to use every opportunity for doing good, especially for our fellow believers. And if we are to boast, it is in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our own abilities and efforts are nothing worth boasting about, but Jesus most certainly is. And this is where our focus should be.

Remembering all that Jesus has done for us gives us a better perspective on life. Amongst all the burdens and temptations and our efforts to love our neighbours, we are drawn out to see the fullness of God's love for all the world. The cross of Christ changed everything. It was a turning point in history. The new creation began with Jesus himself at his resurrection, and it continues in his church through word and sacrament bringing new life to us, and will go on until the whole creation is set free from bondage.

This is the great hope that is found in Christ Jesus. A hope that empowers us to love one another, to bear each other's burdens, and in doing so bear witness to the world of God's great love for all creation. It's a hope that I have had the joy of preaching in this parish for more than eight years, and I pray that you continue to receive it into the future. And may the crucified Christ be forever proclaimed, that you may know the burden of your sin and guilt and shame has been dealt with on the cross. You are a new creation, a forgiven child of God, free to live and love together with all God's family, in this life, and into eternity. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.