

Sermon on Sunday 29 October 2023

by Rev. Alan Stewart

(Readings: Hebrews 12. 1-3, taken from 'The Message', & John 6. 60-69)

I am. I have. I can; Spiritual Resilience

You'll all know the story of the tortoise and the hare. It's a cautionary tale of how pride can come before a fall. It's also a story of resilience; of a tortoise who just kept going, one foot after the other, in spite of the odds.

It might not surprise you that one of the most Googled words of the 2020s is 'resilience'. These last few years have been a perfect storm of medical, political and economic challenge, and many of us have understandably felt battered. Some have bounced back and pressed on, one foot after the other. Others have struggled. We've become weary, apathetic, fearful.

Resilience is a huge thing in schools these days where there's an increasing emphasis on what's called a growth mindset. The opposite, a fixed mindset, is 'I'm either good at something or I'm not. I stick to what I know. If I'm frustrated, I give up'. A growth mindset, on the other hand, embraces challenge. It sees failure as a springboard for growth. It learns from criticism; persists in the face of setback.

Resilience is built on a growth mindset. It's about reframing how

we see setback and failure. And it's strengthened by several other important factors including a strong support network, asking for help, having purpose and goals in life, and focusing on three crucial things; I am, I have and I can. More of that later. One other, perhaps surprising, thing that research tells us is an important part of resilience is spirituality.

The researcher Brené Brown says: "Without exception, spirituality — the belief in connection, a power greater than self, and interconnections grounded in love and compassion — emerged as a component of resilience. Most people spoke of God, but not everyone. Some were occasional churchgoers; others were not. Some worshipped at fishing holes; others in temples, mosques, or at home. Some struggled with the idea of religion; others were devout members of organised religions. The one thing that they all had in common was spirituality as the foundation of their resilience."

I wonder if that rings true for you. Is your spirituality, however you define it, the foundation of your resilience when things go wrong, when the proverbial hits the fan?

In tough times, I've certainly heard people say, 'I don't know how I'd get through this without my faith'. But, equally, I've known others who have ditched their faith; 'Why would God leave me high and dry?', they ask.

There's something here, I think, about expectation; what do we expect from God, however we understand that word? Is faith a

contract – God, scratch my back, I'll scratch yours? Do we expect our lives to be easier, expect God to fix things. Sadly, it doesn't work that way. If anything, faith can take us into harder places where we're challenged to test our motives, wait things out, delay gratification. Perhaps, here, we need that growth mindset where we learn to reframe our expectations, where we practice a faith that can bend, where we're comfortable with questions, where we see our setbacks and weakness as opportunities to grow and to trust.

Many of the disciples in our story today walked away because they found Jesus' teaching too difficult. They wanted an easier path. He failed to meet their expectations.

When his followers are leaving in droves, Jesus turns to the Twelve and asks, 'What about you?'. To which Simon Peter says those incredible words, 'Where can we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we've come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.' Having spent time with Jesus, walked where he walked, listened to and witnessed his compassion and power, they had learnt to trust him with their lives. In the Hebrews reading, we hear that Jesus himself - through abandonment, failure, setback, a cross - learnt to put one step after the other because he never lost sight of his goal, his God. We call that hope; trusting that, however bad it gets, this is not the end. In the end, it will be OK, because if it's not, it's not the end.

This resilient hope is built on trusting in three things; I am, I have and I can.

I am. We're all trying to work out who we are. Jesus took his cue from his God and maybe we should, too. Who does God say I am? God says I'm one of a kind, loved because of who I am and exactly as I am. God says I am stronger than I know. I am forgiven. I am a light for the world. I am a channel for his love. I am more than enough.

I have. We each have a unique calling, purpose, goal, that pulls together our passions and our personality so that we can be part of something much bigger. I have promises from God who says he's with me and for me, and he'll give me exactly what I need when I need it. I also have good people around me, with me and for me. I have more than enough.

And I can. I've made it this far. My past doesn't have to define me; let it be my teacher. With God's backing I can do all things I'm called to. I can choose to emphasise the positive, to keep my heart soft, to live wholeheartedly. I can tap into that superpower called prayer, tuning in to the source of my life, the love that made me, drawing strength from that connection, spending time consciously in that presence, allowing prayer to change me. I can do more than enough.

I am. I have. I can.

Blessed are the resilient, for like the tortoise, they shall put one foot after the other, trusting that they and their God are more than enough.



First Reading: Hebrews 12. 1-3

[Taken from The Message]

Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on *Jesus*, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's *there*, in the place of honour, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he ploughed through. *That* will shoot adrenaline into your souls!

*For the Word of the Lord, **Thanks be to God***

Gospel: John 6. 60-69

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.'

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'

*This is the Gospel of the Lord, **Praise to you O Christ***