

"YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL!"
Romans 8:28-39

A new year begins – a year that is full of uncertainty (as, indeed, is every year, if you think about it); uncertainty in terms of our own personal lives; in terms of the life of this local church, with a change of minister looming; in terms of our national situation, with the pandemic causing all kinds of issues and a government that is seen as increasingly unreliable and corrupt; and in terms of the fragile international situation, economically, environmentally and politically. So it's maybe an occasion when we should reflect on some words from the New Testament, and consider just what a mighty and powerful God we serve.

To some extent, perhaps, we are also taking a brief look at ourselves (in the hope that it might encourage us to take a long, hard look at ourselves and an even longer look at God in the weeks ahead). These days, whenever something goes wrong for a high-profile figure and he or she seems to be taking a lot of flak, the adjective most favoured by those who write about or comment about that person is "*beleaguered*". Whether it's a government minister whose resignation is called for, or a football manager who has not come up to scratch, or a cricket team who lose the Ashes in just 12 days, or a media star who is struggling with their private life, they are said to be "beleaguered". It's a word that conjures up an image of someone down on their luck, at the end of their own resources, and more or less on the point of throwing in the towel.

And more often than not that would be a word that people use for the mood of the church at the moment, when attendances seem to be continuing to fall and the voice of the Christian community seems to be getting less and less of an audience. It may even be the way we think of ourselves here after a couple of years of upheaval, and our routines and outreach affected by the issues surrounding the pandemic – with many people seemingly worn out by the struggle – and with all those uncertainties about the future we have just mentioned, while trying to keep it all going nonetheless.

We're going to sing a hymn to close our worship this morning which is one of my favourites in terms of the words – *God of grace and God of glory*. It contains a line that I have found a source of inspiration and motivation in my own situation and which seems particularly pertinent in the current climate of unbelief and sliding standards of morality. The line I'm referring to begins the last verse – "*Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore.*" Lord, don't let us give in! As we start a new year, may we be encouraged and inspired by our God and his ways!

That hymn was written by Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the great figures of the church in America in the first half of the last century (although his theology probably wouldn't be to the taste of everyone here). He was one of the greatest preachers of the twentieth century and wrote this hymn for the dedicatory service at the formal opening of the great Riverside Church, where he was the founding Minister, in Manhattan in 1931. In his autobiography, *The Living Of These Days*, he writes of these words, "*That was more than a hymn to me when we sang it that day – it was a very urgent personal prayer.*" And so it should be for us, because we so often allow ourselves to descend into "*weak resignation*" – there's nothing we can do and we've just got to put up with it. We are beleaguered and defeated. Why? Well, that's the title for our sermon this morning – the title of a book by the Bible translator J B Phillips – "*Your God is too small.*"

You see, we give up because we think the devil, or the forces of evil, or whatever word or phrase you want to use, has got the upper hand. (I'll use "the devil" as a convenient shorthand.) And some people actually say that – it's the devil stopping people from coming to church: it's the devil that's the driving force behind our culture: it's the devil who is behind the various conspiracies we dig up. Why bother? Why try? The devil seems to be winning. The situation is getting worse and there's no longer any hope. We would say with Fosdick in the second verse of that hymn, "*Lo! The hosts of evil round us scorn thy Christ, assail his ways!*" (He goes on to pray that God will free us from such fears and enable us to praise and serve him.) C S Lewis once said that there are two dangers we can fall into as far as the Devil is concerned: we can either pay him too little attention and end up getting deceived and destroyed by him (which we are warned against in *1 Peter 5:8,9* – "*Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.*").

Or, as we often seem to do, we can pay him too much attention, accord him too much influence, and thus allow our eyes to be taken off Christ.

Sometimes we seem to have submitted to the old heresy known as Manicheanism which saw the whole cosmos as a battleground for the forces of good and evil, darkness and light, God and the devil. They are fighting for the souls of men and women, and seem to be equally matched. And we won't be able to tell until the final victory who will have won. It's a heresy, because we know who will win – indeed, we know who has already won! There is no doubt for us as God's people. God has won that battle. The devil is defeated. What we are experiencing now, as I've said many times before, is the death throes of the devil, thrashing about and trying to do as much damage as possible before his inevitable despatch to the punishment that God has prepared for him.

God has won the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ – and every time we bow to what we think is defeat by the devil, every time we allow the devil to thwart our plans we are betraying that. Every time we allow ourselves to retreat into despair and defeatism, we are demonstrating our lack of faith in our victorious God. Every time we say that it's the devil who has the upper hand we are allowing ourselves to be deceived by the Prince of Lies. The problem we have is our narrowness of vision, our pitifully and sinfully small view of God. What are the consequences of that? Well, two things particularly spring to mind.

Firstly, we look only at our own immediate situation – the here and now. We have no concept of a history or geography of our faith. What do I mean by that? Well, we assume that what we see here and now is an adequate expression of what God is doing. We bang on about how awful things are now and how the forces of evil seem to be taking over. To listen to our complaints it would be easy to assume that our God is impotent. But look back over history – look at the decadence of the later Roman Empire, look at the violence of Mediaeval Europe, look at the appalling heresies and evil cults of the later Middle Ages, look at the sexual and moral excesses of eighteenth-century England, look at the hypocrisy and injustice of Victorian Britain – and that's just in our part of the world. And then consider what happened after each of those periods – periods which I reckon were as full of evil and vice, as lacking in any sense of the fear of God as our apparently morally bankrupt western culture is now – read what God did as the Early Church spread the gospel through that Roman Empire, as the great monastic reform movement took hold of Mediaeval Europe, as the Reformation brought religious revival to sixteenth century Europe, as Wesley and Whitfield and the preachers of the Evangelical Revival transformed eighteenth century England, as the whole face of Victorian Britain was renewed by the rise of the evangelical movement. Our God is not impotent, his arm is not shortened that he cannot save. He's done it before – again and again – and he can still do it in our day.

And it's not just our history that we need to bone up on: it's geography too. Look at what God is doing now in our world in places like China, Latin America, parts of Africa, where tens of thousands of men and women are turning to Christ each week. Remember John the Baptist in prison? – beleaguered and in despair after being jailed for preaching God's word to Herod. It's in *Matthew 11* if you want to check. He began to wonder if Jesus really was the Messiah, whether maybe he'd got it all wrong. So he sent some of his friends to Jesus to ask him, and Jesus replied to John as he replies to us today: "*The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is being preached to the poor.*" It might not be happening as you'd like it to, just where you are, but that doesn't mean God isn't at work, that doesn't mean that God is impotent, that doesn't mean that the devil has the upper hand.

You see, if we start limiting it to what's happening here and now, then, secondly, we start to limit God. And once we start limiting God, once we start to allow our view of God to shrink, we feel we can tell him what to do. A small God becomes a God whom we try to control. We tell him what to do. We think we know what he wants. We tame him and domesticate him. I used to go and speak at the midweek meetings in a little Brethren Assembly in Bush Hill Park, in North London, and I would sit there through their prayer time listening to people telling God what to do, telling him what he already knew ("O Lord, you know what's happening in our area – but just in case you don't, let me remind you for several minutes.") They would pray about what they were doing – usually a witness outside the Co-op – and

remind God just how faithful they were, why did he not honour them for it? But it was small God to whom they prayed – a God who needed to be told what was going on, a God who needed to be told what to do.

It wasn't the God who spoke to the people through the prophet Isaiah in *Isaiah 55:8-11*:

*"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,'
declares the Lord.*

*As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

*As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
it will not return to me empty,
but **will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.**"*

And it wasn't the God about whom Paul was writing to the Romans in the passage we read earlier. Nothing can prevent God carrying out his will if he wants to. He is supreme and he will do it – despite us, if he wants to. Our lack of faith won't stop him. The prevailing climate of evil will not stop him. The rebellion of his people won't stop him. If you think it will, then you've stepped over the line into heresy.

God is a mighty God – **the** almighty God. He has won a victory that can never be denied or gainsaid. And you and I can have a part of that if we want. We are, writes Paul, *"more than conquerors through him who loved us."* This is the God who has demonstrated his love for us in the same way that he demonstrated his victory over the powers of evil. *"If God is for us, who can be against us?"* Paul continues. And how has God shown us that he is for us. Well, *"he did not spare his only Son but gave him up for us all."* In our worship week by week we find ourselves thanking God for what he has done for us in Christ, thanking God for the willingness of Jesus Christ to take on himself our punishment and our fears and failures. We cannot sing those songs and pray those prayers if we don't really believe that the victory was won. If there was no decisive victory at Golgotha, then it was a totally futile gesture – it was worth nothing: certainly not worth remembering in the ways that we do: certainly not worth building our lives upon.

On the cross, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself and defeating the powers of evil which had tried to prolong that alienation between God and the world, and he was winning a victory that could never be turned around. Evil was defeated on the cross – never forget that. And a couple of days later, Christ burst out of that empty tomb to demonstrate that the last great enemy, death, had also been defeated. There is nothing that can now separate us from the love of God. Isn't that what Paul is saying here in *Romans 8:35-39*?

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

*'For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.'*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

God has promised to watch over us, to lead us forward. And he'll keep that promise. Remember those great inspirational words in *Hebrews 10:23,24*: *"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, **for he who promised is faithful.** And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good*

deeds". God is faithful. God is victorious. He is a great God, a magnificent God, a powerful God, a victorious God. How dare we offer the excuse for our lack of faith that the devil is getting the upper hand! We must not allow our vision of God to become too small. We must not limit him by our own poverty of imagination. God can do great things here in this place – but he won't be dictated to by us.

Let us hold on to that faith and perseverance, and move forward with confidence, whether this church is full for every service and meeting or not, whether every friend and neighbour is converted or not, whether every decision taken by our national and local leaders is totally in line with standards of justice and righteousness that we hold to or not. As Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote – and we shall shortly sing – "*Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, lest we miss thy kingdom's goal.*" May that be our prayer throughout 2022 as we look out for God at work in our church and our nation – and in his world.