

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Contentment

Presented by Margaret Hall

Introduction

However you feel about cats - and opinions vary from favoured friends to ruthless destroyers of wildlife - it can't be denied they are masters of the art of contentment. Admittedly their needs are simple: a bit of food and a warm spot to sleep in. A little stroking or rubbing of the cheek will produce that ultimate mark of contentment - the purr.

From its origin the word 'contentment' would literally mean a state of being held together. Cats do give the impression they've got things together, in contrast to the way we often feel, as we're pulled in different directions by competing demands or upset by the turns life takes. As soon as one need or want is satisfied another seems to surface, so that we're more likely to feel restless, distracted and dissatisfied, than be in a state of contentment. There always seems to be something more we'd like to have, or something else we'd like put right. As good as it sounds, is contentment really possible?

I

We read about the secret of contentment in a letter preserved for us in the Bible. Paul wrote it from a Roman prison where he was waiting to find out if he'd be executed. We know from other letters he wrote that life hadn't been easy for him, after he'd realised it was true that Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead.

On the one hand he had a new sense of hope and peace and purpose. He'd been released from the burden of guilt. On the other hand he'd incurred the wrath of the enemies of Jesus. From his earliest days as a Christian there'd been plots to kill him. He'd been stoned and left for dead, stripped of his clothing and beaten more times than he could count. Five times he'd received the official flogging of forty lashes minus one. In his travels to take the good news about Jesus to as many places as possible he'd been shipwrecked three times and had once spent a day and a night adrift in the open sea. In one letter he wrote that he'd been in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, dangers from his own people, dangers from non-Jews, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger from false brothers and sisters, in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. Though all this he'd continued to suffer what he called his "thorn in the flesh", presumably some physical disability. He'd prayed fervently for its removal, but God had not removed it.

Nevertheless Paul said he'd found the secret of contentment. He wrote,

I have learned to be content, whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation., whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Nothing Paul had to go through could take from him what he knew, that God the Son had died so he could be forgiven and then had overcome death's power. He knew it because he'd come face to face with the risen Christ, struck to the ground by Christ's glory on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus. From that moment his life had been turned around. Before, he'd wanted to kill believers in Christ. After seeing the

risen Christ he was willing to suffer every kind of indignity - even be killed himself - rather than fail to pass on what he now knew to be true. He knew Christ was with him through the Holy Spirit in him, interceding for him when he didn't know how to pray, and changing him from one degree of glory to another. He still lived in a broken world where horrible things happened, but he lived in the strength of Christ, who'd fought every bad thing, and won. Whenever and however his life in this world would end, he trusted Christ's promise that everyone who believes in him will be raised to eternal life. He looked forward to life after death - life as it should be, full and free and inexpressibly glorious.

II

When Paul said he'd learned the secret of contentment he'd been falsely accused and was in prison. He was actually facing the prospect of a death sentence. Still he claimed to be content.

The word he used for 'contentment' was the word the Greeks used for a virtue much-prized by their philosophers, especially the group called the Stoics. It meant "self-sufficiency", a state they believed a person could reach if they could rid themselves of feeling and desire, by the sheer force of their will. For example, a philosopher called Epictetus said this:

Begin with a cup or a household utensil. If it breaks, say "I don't care."
Go on to a horse or a pet dog. If anything happens to it, say "I don't care."
Go on to yourself. If you are hurt or injured in any way, say "I don't care."
If you try hard enough you will come to a stage when you can watch your nearest and dearest suffer and die, and say, "I don't care."

Still today some suggest we deal with pain and trouble in that way - meditating our way to a point beyond feeling. Even if it were possible, detaching ourselves from the world is very different from the way Christ took upon himself the world's pain, right through to the point of an undeserved death on a cross. It was through submitting to the power of evil, and the suffering it causes, that he overcame them. His rising from the dead was the evidence that he'd triumphed. Paul had seen him gloriously alive, and was compelled to pass on that news. If passing it on involved him in suffering he was prepared for that, and he would cope, as long as his Lord, Jesus the Christ, was with him in it. So for Paul, contentment was not *self-sufficiency*. It was knowing Christ's strength was sufficient to hold him together and pull him through the darkness to the glorious light ahead.

When Paul said he could do anything through Christ who gave him strength he was referring specifically to the ability to go without his material needs. But Christians through the ages have believed their emotional and spiritual needs are included in the promise that the strength of Christ will hold them together. Oliver Cromwell claimed that this one sentence, "I can do anything through Christ who strengthens me," had saved his life. It had been the only light in the darkness of his utter despondency and misery following the death of his son.

As a young man the photographer Ken Duncan rejected the faith in Christ he'd been brought up in. He tried different kinds of spirituality, only to end up very confused. Finally he turned back to God, and the words, "I can do anything through Christ who strengthens me" were what convinced him that only Christ could bring him safely through the forces he'd unleashed by his dabbling in the spirit world.

No doubt the truth in this one sentence has enabled countless Christians to come through whatever life's thrown up, and it can enable us.

III

The secret of contentment Paul learned was in the strength he drew, in good times and bad, from knowing that God was committed to his good. He knew that because Christ had suffered on his behalf, and now the risen Christ was with him and in him.

On the beach, where our dog and I walk as often as we can, the landscape's always changing. Sometimes, especially when the tide's out, the sand is hard and flat. At other times it's so soft it's difficult to walk on. Sometimes it disappears altogether to expose rocks you didn't know were there. The sea can be as flat as a millpond or turned to white foam for a hundred metres from the shore. But one thing on our walks together is always the same. Whatever the weather or the shape of the sand, the dog's tail is always wagging, a sure sign he's satisfied just to be there, in the company of the person he belongs to.

The landscape of our lives is continually changing. Things happen we didn't expect. Desires go unfulfilled or what we thought would satisfy doesn't. We or those we love may be in circumstances far from ideal. And yet, wonderfully, it's still possible to be content, as long as we're in the company of the Person at the heart of the universe, held together by his love for us and our trust in him. His acceptance of us is soothing balm for our sore hearts. His trustworthiness is the rock that won't move beneath our feet. He knows all the things we can't know and has promised to work all things together for the good of those who love him.

One thing we can't know is whether the changes we might long for would actually be for the best. Some might dream of the good things they'd be able to do if they won the lottery. But I heard the other day of a young woman who broke off her relationship with a young man *after* he'd won the lottery. He'd become impossible to live with. He's since squandered the millions he won and is now homeless and living on the dole.

We also tend to think things would be different if we'd done things differently - made different choices. No doubt there's truth in that, but whatever we've done or not done, we would still have problems - they'd just be a different set - because we live out our imperfect lives in a very imperfect world. But like Paul we can trust God's ultimately in control, and so learn to be content.

Paul's trust in God must have been tested by his "thorn in the flesh", which God did not remove, although Paul pleaded with him again and again to take it away. Many years ago the way God answered Paul had a big impact on me, as a twelve-year-old trying to make sense of the world.

This is how Paul recorded God's answer:

God said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is seen in its completeness through your weakness."

And this was Paul's response:

"If that's how it is, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. For his sake I will delight in weakness and insults, in hardship, in persecution and in difficulties, because it's only when I'm weak that I can be strong."

Conclusion

One of my earliest childhood memories is of a race at a Sunday School picnic when I was probably three or four years old. Someone pointed out to me the person who would give me a sweet if I ran as fast as I could. Instead of running towards the finishing line I ran towards that person, cutting across my competitors and throwing the whole race into confusion. A natural if embarrassing mistake, but also an illustration of the truth that we focus on and gravitate towards whatever we value. If our focus is on our various unsatisfied desires, we will live in a state of discontent. Or we can enjoy God's amazing gift to those who trust him - the strengthening, comforting, empowering presence of the risen Christ.

*No guilt in life, no fear in death,
This is the power of Christ in me;*

*From life's first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny.
No power of hell, no scheme of man,
Can ever pluck me from his hand;
Till he returns or calls me home,
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand!*