



Easter 3, Year B (Evensong) – April 26, 2009

1 Corinthians 10.1-13

A Homily preached by the Rev'd James Popham

"God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength."

On a hot summer afternoon in 2004, I walked into a cool, sterile hospital room in Austin, Texas. I was in the midst of my ten week's of Clinical Pastoral Education, chaplaincy training, required of all seminary students. After lunch each day, I would make my cold calls, just going into rooms on my ward randomly usually with no idea of what I would encounter there.

The ward I was assigned to was the neurology and neurosurgery ward. In this room, I found a bedridden woman, accompanied that afternoon by her husband and a daughter. The wife had just been admitted after suffering a massive stroke, one from which she would never recover. It was, as they say, just a matter of time. The husband, just this side of distraught, filled me in briefly. And then he said, "I know that they say that God will never give you more than you can handle...but that's just a bunch of bull" – although this gentle, genteel man used the two syllable version of that modest expletive.

I thought of what Paul had said to the Corinthians, but realized instantly, thank God, that his breaking heart as he watched his wife struggle through her final days or hours would trump whatever I could say.

And, certainly, Paul's statement presents a challenge to any of us who confront problems and afflictions that seem overwhelming. But does Paul mean that God will step in and magically stop any misfortune in our lives just before it gets to the point that we feel overwhelmed, to that point where we think we really just cannot handle it? Like the sad gentleman in Austin, Texas, watching his wife of many decades slip away from him.

Let's look at Paul's pronouncement from a little different angle. Paul was talking not to an individual facing a crisis, but to a community. In modern North American culture, we so easily forget, even neglect, that we live in community. The emphasis on independence and the individual has afflicted us with a myopia that often fuzzies our vision to the fact we live with other people. So, when we read Paul, we can fall so easily into the trap of thinking he was speaking to individuals and God's relationship with individuals. And then we impose an obligation on God to swoop in and save us from being severely tested, even seemingly beyond our endurance. So when the pain in our lives seems unbearable, we are tempted to shake our fists and our Bibles at God, pointing self-righteously at Paul's letter to the Corinthians. But, again, of course, it was Paul's letter to the Corinthians – plural. Paul was telling a community that the community never would be tested beyond its strength.

And in that assurance, we can draw great solace. Because our life in community, in much more concrete terms than Paul's words, assures us that we never will be denied God's presence and God's help, no matter how dire our circumstances may be. Living in community means we take care of each other. We are the expression of God's love in the world. We are the source of comfort and companionship to those who suffer. We provide the bulwark against the affliction of unbearable pain. When we open our arms in love and extend our hands in aid, we attenuate the pain of our

suffering neighbors. And when we suffer and we open our eyes to others, we open ourselves to God's love as expressed in the loving care of those who surround us.

The next day in that hospital in Austin, Texas, I went back to the room where this suffering husband was watching his wife fade away. He said to me, "How did you know to come in yesterday, at just the moment I thought I couldn't take it, when it was just too much for me to handle?" I answered honestly – and hopefully humbly – that it was the Holy Spirit.

We as God's instruments, empowered by the Holy Spirit, give substance to Paul's words. This is the burden and blessing of our life in community. No one's pain need ever be unbearable, because in community, no one ever bears their pain alone.

Amen.

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