

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Year A (2014)  
Forty Martyrs'; St Bede's

Many of you will be travelling in the next few weeks; and undoubtedly there will be hours spent in traffic jams for those of you who journey by car; delays and late arrivals for the train-goers and endless queues to get through security at whatever airport, to add to the hours one has to spend there anyway. The modern traveller has it tough... because we expect everything at our convenience and all things to be as promised in the advertising. Travelling in fact has never been easier. Never have people been able to get so far, so quickly, and with such little fuss and bother. I am still astonished that I can be at the very bottom of Africa in less than twelve hours flight. Had my grandparents ever considered such an adventure (most of their contemporaries would never have left the county, except to go to war) it would be a mighty uncomfortable sea journey of illness, poor food and boredom for many weeks.

In the ancient world of Paul the Apostle travel was much, much worse. Paul himself tells us about it, in the second letter to the Corinthians (11, 24-28). On his travels he was shipwrecked three times, once spending a day and a night in the water; on dry ground he was ever in danger from bandits; in desert areas and woodlands wild animals would be scavaging; bears, wild boar and particularly wolves marauding in packs. Frequently he had to ford rivers and could have been washed away. If he was well received in one place great, but in many places he was attacked; elsewhere betrayed by false brothers and sisters, fellow Christians. Every city held its threats from thieves; inns were notorious places where you had to keep your bags with you at all times and travel always with trustworthy companions to keep an eye for each other. If you carried money, as you must, it must be in cash making any traveller a target.

As Paul went from place to place he had to pay his way, which he did by learning the trade of a leather worker. Thus he was able to mend sandals, or bag-straps; and in the games-festivals which frequented the ancient world, someone who could repair tents would always find some employment. But if there was no work then he went hungry and thirsty.

Sea transport was available; the prevailing winds coming from the west making travel towards the East generally easier; but the main form of transport was walking, with a stout stick for self-defence, and always in company. The Romans made some attempts to keep the roads safe but it was sporadic. Notorious bands of criminals might be run to ground, but poverty and the loss of land to the elite turned many peasants to bandits so as some were killed there were always more replacing them. And the Roman soldiers brought their own dangers to the traveller, who could be conscripted to carry the soldier's gear one mile. This would have been inconvenient but soldiers could do a lot worse.

So the trials of the traveller could be considerable. And to add to these troubles Paul had many worries about his churches to carry with him. And he had the unexplained 'thorn in the flesh' which he had to bear. Was this a physical complaint, a psychological burden, such as depression; a spiritual darkness? We do not know but he is told to accept it: God's grace will be enough, he is assured.

Paul then knew hardship. His previous life as a Pharisee studying the Law would have been relatively comfortable. But from his encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road and the blindness that disabled him he knew no comfort, no ease. But he never looked back.

In the context of a physically hard, mentally burdensome life Paul's words in today's second reading from the Letter to the Romans must impact on us with its sheer conviction. It is one of Paul's many 'purple passages', which as a trained scholar of rhetoric, the art of argumentation, he must have rehearsed and polished.

He asks a series of rhetorical questions, culminating in: "What can separate us from the love of Christ?" And lists what will not come between us and the love of Christ, all of which will have been part of Paul's recent and future experience: distress, anguish, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword. Paul goes on to list more possibilities, setting together pairs of opposites in order to encompass the whole that lies between them: death nor life; angels (in the spiritual sphere) or principalities (in the material sphere); not present nor future; not height nor depth. In other words nothing, absolutely nothing can come between us and the love of God revealed in Christ.

So when you are complaining about the time you have been sitting in an elongated car park called a motorway with bickering children who won't shut up; or delayed at the airport or railway station where no information is being communicated, when nerves are frayed and loved ones are shouted at, think of Paul and his travails on his travels. Consider how easy is our journeying to far distant places, where a cold drink and a hot meal will be waiting, or not far away. And reflect that such modest hardship does not separate us from the love of Christ. It is we ourselves, by our sins, in our selfishness that separate us from God's love. It is what we do that divides. God's love, in all circumstances, is constant.