

Isaiah 30: 8 – 21; 2 Corinthians 9

**Have you ever felt hemmed in – stuck – not knowing where to go or what to do?**

The other week two people I know separately got stuck on trains during power cuts ... that simultaneous loss of the two power stations ... one was stuck on the train outside King's Cross station for over two hours ... no air conditioning, no drinks, no information – ***“we were too frightened to move until someone came and led us along the tracks – even then some people were too scared to step down onto the tracks ...”***

The other person was fortunate to be able to get on a train at Clapham Junction, but had to endure walking in a pedestrian foot-tunnel under the 18 or so lines to reach their platform. It wasn't the walk itself that was problematic, but the fact that all the lights in this pedestrian tunnel had failed, it was pitch dark ... it was packed with people and very difficult to find the way – ***“we were just crushed in, hemmed in ... until someone came with a powerful torch to guide us out.”***

That term **'hemmed in'** – we tend to use to describe a feeling of being trapped, assailed by things beyond our control.

When we feel like that we need and look for people to lead us out of the danger, out of the helplessness. We often turn to political or religious leaders – we want to trust them, we build our expectations on them – and sometimes that's right, but sometimes their own vested interests will take priority over the needs we have ... they promise fake hope and lead us ***away*** from rescue. It is seldom the case that such leaders suggest that we simply turn to God in times of trouble ... and yet, I'm sure that for many people in time of adversity or extreme personal crisis, the first thing that they do ***is*** to pray for God's help ... and not simply those in the minority who already express a faith in God.

Of course whilst we may call on God to solve the problems, we will also be looking to our leaders, to find practical solutions – and we will all too readily abandon the prayer requests if we're offered a seemingly viable human intervention – being hemmed in by troubles is not where we wish our faith to place us ... and yet ... the term 'hemmed in' is not only a description of when we feel trapped by adversity.

In **Psalm 139** for example the writer describes the human relationship with God in this way: ***“You have searched me out and know me. You have hemmed me in behind and before and laid your hand upon me.”***

The meaning here is that in hemming us in, God is enfolding us in loving protection – never abandoning us, but always knowing the situation in which we find ourselves – God is ***not*** judging us, but is protecting the salvation he offers us – enfolding us and laying his hand on us as a sign of his saving power.

In tonight's Old Testament reading Isaiah is speaking to a people who are in deep trouble, hemmed in on all sides and forgetful of that saving power. Israel is under attack from the Assyrians – the Northern Kingdom will collapse and Judah, the Southern Kingdom will be in great peril. Look at the world today – it is normal for nations to seek alliances, to protect themselves from enemies ... but this is Israel, God's chosen Kingdom ...

... how does it choose to save its Southern region ... by an alliance with Egypt. **Egypt?! – the enslavers of Israel, the place from which Moses led God’s people towards the freedom of the Promised Land.**

“How can this be?” asks Isaiah. God’s chosen people break their covenant with God: they do **not** ask for God’s help **and** they forsake him even further by trusting in something else – something political – the leaders, who should have known better, reject the warnings of the Prophets and they reassure and manipulate their own people by lies and deceit – they and the people of Israel should be hemmed in by God, but are only hemmed in by those who wish them ill.

Isaiah reminds us that it is only in the quiet and stillness that we find solutions – for it is only in the quiet that we truly listen for God and thus it is only then that we may feel that hand laid upon us, even in the midst of our troubles, and hear the voice of God saying, as he rescues us: **“This is the way, walk in it”** – Israel’s failure to hear God leads to destruction and exile – to disaster and sorrow – but in the midst of all this Isaiah reminds them that God does not and will not abandon them ... as soon as they cry out to him genuinely and from the heart he will answer them and they will know that he is with them – whether they turn to the left or the right, his voice will be heard behind them: **“This is the way – walk in it.”**

And so for us too – we are abundantly blessed and privileged to be able to walk in the “Way of God” because Christ has shown us that way: **“I am the way and the truth and the life”** ... Christ surrounds us, hems us in with God’s love.

Armed with this knowledge we can surely withstand all the trials and tribulations that seem to hem us in – we know God’s will for us, the salvation we receive by his grace. In **2 Corinthians 9** Paul praises his friends for the manner in which they are following Christ – the way of Christ. Knowing in faith that they are loved and enfolded in him, they act in generosity towards all the people they meet and their giving to others is itself an act of praise and thanksgiving to God. The generosity they pour out will bring others to Christ’s way.

So Paul encourages us all to give what we can, to be generous beyond our means to everyone who needs us – in this manner we give and receive the overwhelming love that is released. Paul encourages us all to have faith, to have courage in the God who provides abundantly more that we can ever need. Let us give thanks and praise to our God who hems us in and enfolds us with the loving salvation of Jesus Christ.

Amen.