

15th January, 2017.

Reading: Isaiah 49: 1 - 7

Sermon: The Battle between Head and Heart

Conflict is the theme that is being considered on the Church of Scotland's website for this month. The material has been prepared by various denominations and communities of faith in the United Kingdom and although I haven't really used their material in my sermons, they have provided me with food for thought and certainly a starting point.

This week, the theme points towards the internal conflict that we feel at times. It points towards the battle that can rage between head and heart.

Any of you that watch *Wanted Down Under* on weekday mornings will see that on a regular basis? The family want a new start, for whatever reason, and their heads tell them that Australia or New Zealand is the place to get it.

After a week there, they watch a video from home in which parents and siblings and friends are telling them how much they will miss them and particularly the children, and the couple are then torn. Their hearts are ripped in two. Their hearts often tell them that it is a mistake to take the children away from their family and everyone who loves them.

They then have to decide if they will go with their heads or their hearts. Do they deprive their parents of their grandchildren for what they think will be a better life or do they deny themselves the opportunities that Australia or New Zealand may offer? That is the conflict faced by most of them.

The servant in our reading today from Isaiah finds himself facing conflict. Head and heart are engaged in a battle.

In our passage from Isaiah, the servant starts off very positively speaking about his faith. He has a strong sense of belonging, of belonging to God even before He was born, and of God knowing his name and having a clear purpose for him.

He has been fashioned like a tool. He compares his mouth to a sharpened sword and himself to an arrow protected by the quiver of God. He sees himself as God's arrow and has the faith to know that God will direct him in the way that he should go, like anybody firing an arrow. God has a clear direction for his life and has prepared him for that life of service.

There is no sense of God failing in His task. He has got His man, His servant, and has prepared him for the task ahead. The Lord said to him: You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendour.

Those words speak of victory, of success, of God being honoured and indeed glorified by the work of His servant. Yes, God is speaking to the nation of Israel, to His people, but He speaks as if there were only one of them. The faith of the nation is seen in the individual and the individual knows in his heart that God will not let him down when he does what God asks of him because He is perfectly made.

But then, all of a sudden, the servant's head takes over. I have laboured in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all. Those are words which lead us to the miry pit, to the depths of despair, to that place from which there seems no escape and no point to life and living. That is where the servant lands. Things are not going well.

We heard on the news on Friday night about the staggering number of young people who took their own lives in 2016 because they had reached that point, that point which they saw as the point of no return.

Our minds can run riot. They can be out of control and when they are, we can plummet to the depths of despair. The servant has all but reached that point in his head and yet his heart is saying something else. Despite feeling that he has failed, he says: Yet what is due to me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God.

There is hope and there is a future, no matter how black it seems. The servant's faith is still able to hold him securely in that miry pit, in that place of despair and hopelessness but there is very clear conflict between his head and his heart. His heart is telling him that he is God's and that he is perfectly made for the task given to him. His heart is telling him that God has his reward waiting for him, while his head is telling him, he is a complete and utter failure.

It's a desperate situation to be in and yet so many people of all ages land in that place, that place of despair and hopelessness.

How awful must it be, though, to be at what seems like the end of road, to be in that place of hopelessness, and to have no faith, no sense that there is any hope!

Having faith does not make it easy when we reach that point but having no faith makes it so much worse, so bad that we could not begin to imagine how bad because we have faith. We know that even when we lose sight of God, He does not lose sight of us. We know that when we stop believing in Him, stop trusting in Him, He does not stop believing in us and

trusting in us.

We have to pull out all the stops, just as Isaiah did, to make sure our hearts keep that truth in mind even when our heads are telling us a different story. We have to be like the Israelites in exile. We have to remember how it used to be when we went to the house of the Lord and take it from there, till we are once again able to praise our God, as we once did.

Did you notice that the reassurance received by the servant comes from God when the servant is in prayer? There is a conversation that takes place between them. God confirms that Israel is His servant and that in him He will display His splendour, and despite his feelings of failure, the servant is able to say that his reward is with his God. That comes through prayer, through spending time with God in that pit of hopelessness and despair.

However, I can't help wondering how the servant felt when he heard that God had even greater plans for him. God says, It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob. I will also make you a light to the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

We might think that that would push us over the edge. We can't cope with what we have been given to do. How will we ever cope with more? But it is not cruelty on God's part to give the servant more to bear than he already has on his plate.

What God does is demonstrates His faith in the servant. He knows that the servant is fearfully and wonderfully made, as it says in Psalm 139. He knows that the arrow is in His quiver and that it is He who directs it. God knows that He is the one who has ultimate power, as we heard last week,

and so the future is secure in His hands and with His servant whom He has chosen.

How does that make us feel when we consider what it is that God has called us to do, because we are all called to serve Him one way or another? Do we stand like the servant saying that we are incapable of fulfilling the task given to us and doubting our capabilities? Do we sink into the pit of fear and hopelessness? Do we go with our heads or do we go with our hearts? Do we hear the message that God has made us, that God knows us and that we do everything in His strength. We stand in His strength. We climb out of the miry pit of despair in His strength and we move forward in His strength.

Our faith in our God is not misplaced. God is not battling conflict and He is strong enough to direct our lives when conflict engulfs us and threatens our very being. God has chosen us as His servants. Will we serve Him despite what we see as our inadequacies as we enter this new year? Will we serve Him, knowing that He has fashioned us and is waiting to direct us to the job that He has for us to do?