

541 The Longsuffering of the Lord

In our previous Reflection, 540 “Praise ye the Lord!”, based on Psalm 105, we saw how the Lord graciously remembered His covenant people throughout their long history, and how His people, of both Old and New Covenants, are blessed in return in remembering God’s loving faithfulness towards us day by day. Truly, “[It is of] the LORD’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. [They are] new every morning: great is thy faithfulness” (Lamentations 3.22-23, KJV).

In our remembering we often come across one particular feature of the Lord’s character of much relevance in these wild days - that He is “longsuffering”. For instance, back in Exodus Chapter 34, we read how the Lord instructed Moses, “Hew thee two tables of stone like unto the first ... be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning unto mount Sinai, and present thyself there to me in the top of the mount” (from Exodus 34.1-2). Moses duly obeyed, “And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord ... ‘The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin ...’” (from vv.4-7a).

In this instance the Lord was being longsuffering towards Moses himself, for He had good reason to be righteously angry at Moses’ own “anger waxing hot” when “he cast the tables away and brake them ...” (from 32.19b). But no, the Lord overcame the problem of the broken tables of stone by simply starting again. In so doing, He left Moses in no doubt at all as to His glory, and His mercy, and His willingness eventually to judge, for He “will by no means clear [the guilty]; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and fourth generation” (34.7b). These are solemn words indeed, found also in the second of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20.4-6), which emphasise that His longsuffering, blended with His mercy, is not limitless: the Lord God is wholly ready to judge guilt and sin as and when He chooses, as He has done frequently in the past, and as He has promised that He will do so again in times to come (egs., Matthew 24.29-42; 25.41-46 / II Thessalonians 1.10 / Revelation 20.11-15).

So we see already that the Lord’s longsuffering is significantly different from tolerance. Tolerance involves a shoulder-shrugging acceptance of ‘sinful behaviour’ as scripturally defined, be that behaviour in ourselves or in others. Within such tolerance, under its twin banners of “Live and

let live” and “Everyone to his own”, core concepts such as “right and wrong” hardly exist. Thus for instance, so-called “Pride” flags are now regularly flown from UK government buildings, indicating official approval of homosexual practice; we note that there no such flags flown showing official approval of heterosexual practice too.

By contrast, longsuffering, by the Lord or by us, involves no acceptance of sinful behaviour, but rather a deliberate restraint from action for the time being, with the prospect of judgment to come. In the KJV Old Testament, there are just four occurrences of the English word “longsuffering”, each one referring to the Lord’s own longsuffering nature towards His people. Then in the KJV Gospels there is no mention of the word “longsuffering”, even though the Lord Jesus must have practised longsuffering with His disciples and His opponents on most days of His life! (eg., Mark 9.19).

In the rest of the KJV New Testament we have 13 mentions of longsuffering. Some of these references apply still to the Lord Himself, as in – “despisest thou the riches of his (God’s) goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?” (from Romans 2.2,4; see also Romans 9.22 / I Peter 3.20 / II Peter 3.9,15). Other occurrences of longsuffering in the text refer to Paul’s own experiences (II Corinthians 6.6 (1-10) / I Timothy 1.16 / II Timothy 3.10).

The final KJV New Testament “longsuffering” mentions refer directly to all of us as members of the Church, showing that our getting along together needs generous doses of mutual longsuffering! (egs., Galatians 5.22-26 / Ephesians 4.2 / Colossians 1.11; 3.12 (-17) / II Timothy 4.2). But in such tasks God the Father is graciously leading us all, in Christ and in the power of His Holy Spirit, “till we come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ ...” (Ephesians 4.13).

At this time of Trinity Sunday, in repentance and confession we thank the Lord afresh for His longsuffering towards us in Christ; we reject any longsuffering of sin within our own lives; and we practise longsuffering, one of those precious “fruits of the Spirit”, among all with whom we have to do (eg., Romans 12.9-21).