

The scope of the Gospel

If you read between the lines of Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, from which our lesson this morning was taken, it is quite clear that there were issues between Paul and this church that he had founded and that there was an uneasy relationship between them. Certainly, there were aspects of Paul's behaviour which many in the church found difficult and controversial.

Last week we looked at one issue which was troubling the church and which had to do with whether or not Christians should eat meat that had been offered to idols in the temples of Corinth. We won't go over all that again, but suffice to say that Paul took a position that would have caused some mutterings among the more educated and sophisticated in the church who no doubt thought that he was pandering to people's superstition and ignorance. But if we had read on we would have found another issue arising which would have been equally problematic to the wealthy and powerful in the church and it revolves around whether or not Paul should have received payment from the Corinthian church for his work there. Now, Paul is clear that he has every right to receive payment. As he says earlier in the chapter, 'who plants a vineyard and does not eat any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not get any of its milk?' In other words Paul knows that he is entitled to receive just recompense for his labours in establishing this – and yet he refuses. Why? Well, why indeed? It is not entirely clear except that Paul feels strongly that he will be more free to preach the gospel that way. And as with the issue of eating meat offered to idols Paul is especially concerned that the gospel should reach first and foremost the poor and the weaker and less powerful members of the community. He wants to prioritise the poor lest they should in anyway be marginalised or disempowered. As he says in verse 22 of our reading, 'to the weak I become weak so that I may win the weak.' Paul prioritises the weak and to do so he insists on becoming weak and he does this by refusing to become dependent on a salary. And you can see where he is coming from. After all, you know the saying, 'who pays the piper calls the tune.' And Paul knows that if he accepts money from the established figures of the Corinthian community then they immediately have power over him, they can dictate to him their priorities, they can control him. And before you know it decisions are being made by the wealthy and the powerful in the church and then the poorer, weaker members

of the community feel marginalised and excluded and they become alienated from the church and the gospel. And if we had read on we would have discovered that was exactly what was happening in the church at Corinth.

Now, as we consider this scenario, there are two things which stand out particularly which I think merit consideration. The first is Paul's extraordinary passion to proclaim the gospel and to make sure that nothing gets in the way of that – whether it's eating meat that has been offered to idols or whether it's taking payment for his services to the Corinthian church. For him either of those might cause an obstacle, might interfere with the offer of the Gospel to everyone. And as he says in verse 16, 'woe betide me if I do not proclaim the gospel!' This is Paul's focus. It's the burden of his life, the one thing for which he will go to any lengths whatsoever – not least turning his back on payment. And I find myself challenged by that passion, that single-minded dedication. I know that Paul has a special calling. I know that he has had a dramatic conversion experience whereby he has been called to break through the boundaries of his Jewish faith in order to expand the parameters of God's people to include the Gentiles. That gave him a special mission. I know all that. And yet I find myself haunted by that ringing declaration, 'woe betide me if I do not preach the gospel.' And it's very difficult. People nowadays are rightly suspicious of Bible-bashers. And while we go on *ad nauseam* about the right to free speech there are nevertheless certain things that you are expected to keep to yourself, and religion is one of them. And of course behind Paul's determination to preach the gospel lies a deep conviction that it is true and many people today are wary of anyone who is convinced that they know the truth. One of the refrains of our days that we hear over and over again is, 'I am not religious but I'm spiritual.' And behind that partly lies the perception that religion is all about dogma and certainty while spirituality is more vague, more uncertain, more questioning, more tentative, less zealous. 'Spiritual' has associations of 'this is true for me' while 'religious' has associations of 'this is true for you' and people reject that.

So how do you preach the Gospel in an age that is so suspicious of religion? This came up in our Bible Study this week when someone pointed out the effect of saying that you are a Christian. Say that at work and suddenly there's an awkward silence. Say that in company and someone will change the subject. But maybe that is where it begins. Maybe in this secular age where religion provokes suspicion and antipathy, preaching the gospel begins with

just a simple testimony that we go to church, that we are a Christian – not banging on about it but just dropping that pebble into the pool and waiting for the ripples. And you might be surprised sometimes at just how the ripples spread. Though of course having dropped that pebble your life then is under scrutiny – so beware!

So that is one thing that strikes us here about Paul – his dedication to spreading the gospel at every opportunity and his determination to remove any possible obstacle. But the other thing that is striking in this passage and which is related to that is the extraordinary adaptability of the Gospel, the way in which it can address different situations, different contexts, different aspects of human life. Listen again to Paul’s passion to spread the gospel. ‘To the Jew I become a Jew, in order to win Jews’, he says. ‘And to those under the law I became as one under the law so that I might win those under the law... and to the weak I became weak so as to win the weak...’ and so on. And what comes through here is Paul’s conviction that the Gospel is big enough and rich enough and full enough to address all kinds of different contexts and cultures and scenarios. And so he is sensitive to the fact that the Gospel has something distinctive to say to Jews and to Jewish culture and belief and he must become a Jew so that he can say it. And he knows that the Gospel has something to say to the Gentiles, to non-Jews and to Greek and to Roman culture and what it has to say will be slightly different from what it has to say to the Jews, and Paul resolves to become as a Gentile in order to be able to say it. In other words he empathises with both Jew and Gentile in order that he might preach the gospel to both. And we could go on with other examples. To take just one - the Gospel has something specific to say to women that will be in some respects slightly different from what it has to say to men, given the history and experience of each in any given culture or society. And men can’t become women and women can’t become men but sometimes we have to listen very carefully to one another otherwise we miss the fullness of the Gospel and its nuances that are specific to each. So yes, of course there is a sense in which the Gospel is universal with the same message for everyone: ‘God so loved the world that he sent his only Son that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.’ That’s a message for all. It’s a message that unites the human race, binding us together under one Gospel of God’s redeeming love. But that one, universal message cashes out differently at different times and in different

places and it cashes out differently in the life of every single one of us. And that requires sensitivity and empathy.

There was a great theologian last century by the name of Paul Tillich who was wonderfully perceptive about human nature and human life and the way in which the Gospel addresses us in different ways at different times. He wrote of how to be human is to be confronted with three deep fears or anxieties that the Gospel addresses – anxiety about death and the fact that we all die; an anxiety about guilt and the sense that we have all done wrong; and anxiety about meaning – whether or not there is any overarching meaning and purpose to life. And for Tillich these anxieties are always present but in ancient times in antiquity, it was anxiety about death that was uppermost. And in the middle ages it was anxiety about guilt and forgiveness, and in one way what we call the Reformation in the 16th century was all about that. You could say that the great Reformer Martin Luther kick-started the Reformation with his cry, ‘how can I get me a gracious God?’ and that was because the Roman Catholic church of his day was no longer mediating the grace and forgiveness of God. In the era of the Reformation those issues dominated. And Tillich suggests that the modern anxiety, today’s anxiety concerns meaninglessness, the sense that there is no meaning and purpose to life, that it is just an accident, an absurdity. And maybe the quest today for spirituality, the need to be spiritual, comes out of the sense of meaninglessness. The contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor who is a Roman Catholic has written a massive analysis of our contemporary world called ‘The Secular Age’ in which he speaks of a sense today that something is missing, that there is a ‘lack of weight, gravity, thickness, substance... a deeper resonance... which we feel ought to be there...’ And it is that sense of emptiness that can make us cynical about life and can cause us to despair and it surely lies behind today’s quest for the spiritual. And we need to understand all that. Like Paul, we need to empathise in order that we might preach the Gospel – and that preaching begins with dropping that pebble in the pool. And we must have confidence in the Gospel, confidence that it has a word to speak and that people need to hear. We need to encourage one another to really believe that the Gospel really can be all things to all people, to adapt Paul’s phrase.

All things to all people. I wonder how the Gospel might address you this morning, each one of you – and me. The scope of the Gospel is universal. It is one message of the love and grace of God. But it cashes out differently, it addresses each of us in our uniqueness. So, be assured that the Gospel is big

enough and rich enough to address your life and your needs and anxieties – and, please God, in that confidence may you discover that you have something to share with others. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
creator of all things,
Saviour of the world,
divine lover who fills our hearts,
we praise and worship you.
Here this morning in this place,
with our words and our songs and our prayers
we honour you, the only true and living God,
who has made us for your pleasure and your glory
and who has called us to belong to your special people,
that we might bear witness to your love and your truth.
You have called us into the family of God,
the Body of Christ, in order that we might proclaim
to the world the gospel of your redeeming love,

and that we might bear witness to the new life
and to the new world that is your gift to us
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
O God forgive us for the poverty of our witness.
Forgive us that so often we are silent when we should speak;
And forgive us that so often when we do speak of our faith,
our actions and our lives deny what we claim.
O God, have mercy upon us and forgive us we pray.
Reassure us of your patience with us.
Reassure us of your steadfast love that will not let us go.
And give us strength, and give us courage, we pray,
to proclaim in word and in deed who we serve
and to whom we belong.
We pray all these things in Jesus' name,
and in his words we pray together, saying...

O holy God,
we have been reminded again this week,
in the barbaric murder of a hostage,
of how evil and cruel we can be,
and how religion can become such a force for terror.
O God, bless we pray the witness of the Christian faith,
and the Christian church.
Grant that the height and depth and length and breadth
of the Gospel may be proclaimed by your people,
and that it might be a force for peace and reconciliation
in our world.
O God in this part of the world where faith is held

by many with suspicion or contempt,
make us sensitive to the concerns and the needs
of our day and inspire us to speak a word in season.

O God bless, as always, world leaders.

Equip them with wisdom and sensitivity in guiding
the affairs of our nations and may we be led
into greater justice and peace.

O God we pray today especially for the conflict

In Ukraine.

We pray for Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande

And President Putin as they negotiate over the future
of that region and we pray against anything that will
contribute to conflict and instability.

And we pray for a thawing of relations

between Moscow and the West