

Woe betide me if I do not proclaim the Gospel

Evidently all was not entirely well between Paul, chief missionary of the Christian faith, and the church at Corinth that he had founded. We need not go into details here, but it seems that people were questioning Paul's authority and influence, and that had left Paul feeling a need to defend himself and his ministry to this church at Corinth. And understandably, therefore, Paul is very concerned to stress that God has called him and God has authorised him. He has God's backing! And given this context one thing that strikes us forcibly in reading these verses is the strength of Paul's conviction about his faith, his vocation, his extraordinary confidence in his belief in Jesus. There is no doubt or uncertainty in Paul's mind. He knows what he believes and he is convinced of his calling to proclaim Christ to the world around: to Jew and Gentile, to slave and free, to weak and strong. 'Woe betide me', says Paul, 'if I do not proclaim the Gospel.'

I wonder, where did such certainty and conviction come from? This week in our Bible Study we were looking at Paul's conversion – that dramatic encounter with Jesus even as he journeyed to Damascus to root out and to persecute Christian believers. It was obviously an overwhelming experience, leaving Paul with a deep conviction that his life was now entirely at the disposal of the Jesus who he formerly persecuted. Earlier in this letter to the church at Corinth Paul has acknowledged the apparent absurdity of what he believes – that somehow in this figure of a crucified criminal executed for blasphemy and sedition God was uniquely at work reconciling the world to himself. What utter foolishness! What nonsense! Yet this folly was in fact the wisdom and truth of God that Paul was now committed to sharing with the whole world.

I would suggest that such conviction, such certainty fits rather uncomfortably in our modern world, where we are very wary of Bible bashers, of people who seem to feel called to lay their religious faith on everyone else. I was fascinated recently to watch the Netflix series *The Crown* about the post-war British monarchy.

One episode concerned the visit to the UK in 1954 of the American evangelist Billy Graham who was motivated by Paul's refrain, 'woe betide me if I do not proclaim the Gospel'. Scheduled to last four weeks Graham's ministry extended to three months: three months of nightly Crusades, as they were called, which were attended by over 2 million people in London alone. This was a different world! This world was still largely unfamiliar with the issue of other faiths. It was a pre-1960 world where the acids of secularism had not yet seriously corroded the 'Christian nation'. And what a contrast today. In matters of religion we are wary of evangelists. We prefer to be more tentative, more hesitant. We are respectful of people who are seeking truth, searching for meaning, but we are wary of anyone who claims to have found it. One of the refrains of our age is, 'I am not religious but I'm spiritual', and behind that there 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 we don't like that.

Well, this is the world that we live in and it's a challenge to the church. And what intrigues me about this passage this morning is that for all his conviction Paul seems to acknowledge that the Gospel needs to be adapted and accommodated to the situation of the hearers. 'To the Jews I become a Jew, in order to win Jews...', he says. 'To the weak I become weak, so that I might win the weak...' and so on. In other words, you can't just throw the truth of God at people. Their condition, their mind-set, their situation needs to be taken into consideration. God's truth must connect with where people are mentally and spiritually, today. And this is where I am intrigued by what we do here today on this Communion Sunday. In a few moments we will say together the Apostles' Creed, the ancient statement of faith owned by Christians throughout the centuries. This is the tradition in which we stand, the faith passed on from generation to generation. These are the bare bones of belief that claim us as Christian. But then we come to the table and we believe that Christ meets us and feeds us, and that means that he reaches out to us where we are hungry, in our particular circumstances. Here, at this table this morning, Christ reaches out to you specifically, by

name. And in our sceptical age we may find Paul's certainty difficult, and in our secular age our faith may at times falter, and we may struggle with the creeds of the church. But we trust Paul's Christ to meet us where we are, in our particular spiritual hunger, as he becomes all things to all people.

So let our church be founded firmly on the tradition handed down through the ages and in which we rejoice. But may it always be supple and open enough to embrace those who seek for truth but who struggle sometimes to find it, and who find that the kind of certainty that seems to have possessed Paul so often eludes them. 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...