

2 Corinthians 4

Read 2 Cor 4. 1-12.

In the next 13 weeks we are going to be looking at 2 Corinthians together in our Sunday mornings. This morning we are going to dive into the letter at chapter 4 and so it is particularly important that we understand some of the context of the letter more generally before we look at the passage we just read.

Corinth was a wealthy city in what is now the country of Greece. It had a population of roughly 500,000 people- which is I think about twice the size of Tower Hamlets. It was an important city in terms of trade routes. It was famous for its pagan temples especially a temple to the goddess Aphrodite- the goddess of love and it was also famous for its' immorality.

You may have heard that In 2013, a new word has been added to the English dictionary- the word "selfie". And I guess you know that a selfie is a picture taken with the camera pointing back at yourself. Well, I am told that around the time that Paul was writing this letter, Corinth was so renowned for its immorality that a new word was added to the ancient Greek dictionary, and that was the verb- "to corinthianise" – which meant to pursue sexual immorality of various kinds. Corinth also liked to dabble in philosophy and wisdom, and there was also a culture of power. The great god Zeus was also quite a big feature in their thinking!

On his first missionary visit there, Paul had planted this church. But after he left them to visit other churches, things had not been going very smoothly. Corinth, perhaps not surprisingly, was a complicated, messy church. There were divisions in the church, some preferred one apostle over another and began to form different groups under different apostles! There was also an unhealthy focus on the more spectacular, powerful spiritual gifts, the gift of speaking in tongues for example. The Corinthian believers liked things to be impressive and powerful.

There had even been some issues with sexual immorality in the church and Paul had written to the Corinthian church about some of these issues in his first letter which is 1 Corinthians. He had instructed them on church discipline issues and how they must deal with the brother who had been sinning.

But something else had happened to the church in Paul's absence. There were some other ministers who Paul calls super-apostles who had found their way into the church. These apostles had attracted the attention of the Corinthian church because they had a message that seemed to be just the sort of thing the church was into. It was about signs and wonders and power. They were slick and impressive and the church thought they were terrific! And little by little they began to be drawn away from Paul and his message. They began to look down on Paul's ministry as being inferior perhaps and even began to doubt that it was the genuine gospel. Paul seemed to make such heavy-work of the Christian life. Paul's ministry was beset with difficulty and suffering and setbacks. Why would they want to subscribe to that sort of deal?!

And so Paul writes 2 Corinthians with the purpose of showing the believers there what true gospel ministry and life looks like. He says true, genuine gospel-centred life looks like weakness. Look at 2 Cor 1. 8. We do not want you to be uninformed brothers, about the hardships we suffered in Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life".

Paul knew from painful experience, that the gospel way is a way of suffering, of difficulty, of hardship and it must be like this because that is the essence of the gospel. The cross of Christ did not look like power and success, it looked like failure, it looked like a waste, it seemed to be a disappointment, it looked like weakness. And yet, it was the most powerful event that has ever occurred in the history of time! And that cross, is at the very centre of our faith and must be the pattern for our life and our gospel-work. It is not about slick presentation and powerful deeds, but it is about taking up our cross and following Jesus.

The story is told of a Scottish man whose wife signed him up for an evening class in jewellery and precious stones. On the first evening he went along, a little reluctantly, and the teacher of the class instructed his new students to sit down at their tables. On the table was a magnifying glass and a diamond. The teacher then said he wanted them to look at the diamond through the magnifying glass. And to keep looking at it. And that was what they had to do for the next hour of the lesson until it was time to go home. The next week, they arrived at the class and once again on each table there was a magnifying glass and a diamond, and the instructions were the same. Look at the diamond through the magnifying glass. Which they did for the next hour. The next week, it was the same. And again the next week, until by the 6th week the man began to complain. You know I've been

coming along here each week, paying good money for the class, and all we get to do is look at a diamond; and to top it all, this week the diamond we've been given isn't even genuine. It's a fake!

So as we read 2 Cor and study it together that is what we are doing. We are looking together at the real gospel. Paul is giving us the magnifying glass and the diamond and we are looking and looking again until we are very clear about what genuine gospel-centred work and gospel-centred living looks like, and we can easily spot the fakes when they come along.

Just before we get to the bit of the letter we read, let's have a brief look at the previous chapter. In chapter 3 Paul begins to target some of his remarks at the so-called "super-apostles". In their application for the post of church leadership in Corinth they had brought all sorts of letters of recommendation. On paper, they looked pretty good! They had excellent references.

But Paul says to the church, "We don't need those bits of paper, they don't count for much. What counts is you, you Corinthian believers. You are all the references that we need. Your changed lives are a letter from Christ. Everyone can read that. Everyone can see the results of our ministry. Our message has not been about impressive presentation, but it has been about lives that have been transformed by the power of God. You believers have been changed, are being changed, and will be changed, incredibly, into something that looks like the glory of God – the same glory that we see in the face of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, Therefore, (verse 1 of chapter 4), we do not lose heart.

We do not lose heart. Because we have this ministry, this ministry that changes lives for ever... we do not lose heart. We are facing opposition, we are facing difficulty, it may look weak, but we do not lose heart.

And that phrase "do not lose heart" is interesting too. It means we do not grow weary, we do not give up, we do not behave differently when we are put under pressure. We do not change the message when opposition comes.

And Paul, again with the super-apostles in his sights, begins to defend the message that he has preached. As he does so he holds up his own life and ministry as the genuine diamond. This is what the ministry and life of the genuine gospel worker will look like. This is how his CV will read.

And so as we look at these verses, I have two points to make this morning.

Firstly, when facing extreme difficulty, gospel workers still preach Christ!

And secondly, when facing extreme difficulty, gospel workers are not defeated, but experience the power of God.

I should just add at this point, that I think primarily Paul's remarks are addressed to preachers of the gospel, those involved in Christian teaching, but it is also true to say that we are all gospel workers. We are all commissioned to take the gospel to all nations. This message is for all of us.

So, firstly, when facing extreme difficulty, Gospel workers still preach Christ.

It seems that Paul is going through his CV with the believers in Corinth. My references are good, they are your changed lives, as we have seen, but my qualifications are good too. What qualifies me to preach the gospel? It is God's mercy. By God's mercy, I have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. On the Damascus road the blindingly bright light of the glory of God shone on Paul and he saw Jesus Christ. And this is what qualifies him to be a true apostle. He has seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and it changed him forever.

So Paul then starts to tell them how they can recognise a genuine gospel worker. And by implication he points out how the super-apostles are not true and genuine. Despite all their show of power, they are not the real thing. But Paul is.

When facing hard times the true gospel worker will not lose heart. Paul says we don't change the message when things get difficult or when we don't appear to be successful.

And he then gives them 3 things the true gospel-worker will not do.

They will not deceive. They will not distort/dilute. And they will not distract.

The true gospel worker will not deceive. They are open about the message- they don't hide anything. They don't preach with secret motives or for personal gain. Just look back at 2 Corinthians 2.17. "Unlike so many we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God". It seems that these other apostles were trying to make money out of Christian work! They were after a large salary and a comfortable life!

The true gospel worker does not distort or dilute the message. They don't make it say what they want it to say, and they don't add stuff that isn't there. We haven't just thought up a nice message, we simply preach what's there.

The idea behind the words here is the same sort of practice that drug-dealers sometimes use. They cut the drug with something else that looks similar but is not the real thing. That's what the super-apostles had been doing. Adding stuff that looked similar but was not the true gospel.

Paul, says, we have kept the message the same. We haven't added something that looks the same just to make it look like you're getting more for your money!

Then Paul says, the genuine gospel worker does not distract. We don't preach ourselves he says. We don't distract from the message of the gospel.

Perhaps there is always a temptation to preach ourselves. To try to be popular or somehow special. Perhaps we start to think that the power of the message somehow depends on our presentation of it. To think that it will only be a powerful gospel if we are powerful preachers. Paul says, no, that's not how it is. Perhaps this is particularly the temptation when the pressure increases, when the difficulties come, we begin to look to our own resources, turn to our own strengths and we forget that it is not about us, it is about Christ. We don't change lives, Christ does. We don't open blind eyes, Christ does. It is when people see the light of the glory of God, as they look at the face of Jesus, that they are changed. Let's not lose our confidence in the power of the gospel to change lives.

Christ is our message. We preach Christ, not ourselves. He is the Lord, not us. We do have a role of course. What is our role? We are servants. Servants of God's people. The leadership team, the preaching team, we are your servants. Please don't put us on pedestals. Paul goes on in verse 7 to talk about jars of clay, and says, ministers are like jars of clay. We are like clay-pots. Not attractive, not impressive, actually pretty fragile.

I wonder if we sometimes focus too much on the clay pots. I recently heard someone from another church, say something like this about their leader: "We are so lucky to have him as our pastor, he's such an excellent bible teacher". And, don't get me wrong here. We should value excellent bible teaching and be thankful for our teachers, but remember, they are just clay pots at the end of the day, fragile, weak, unimpressive clay-pots. You don't glory in the clay pot, you glory in the treasure that's inside it! When facing tough times, we don't look for powerful and impressive leaders, what we do, is we preach Christ!

My second point this morning is this:

When facing extreme difficulty, gospel workers are not defeated, but rather experience Gods power.

So, Paul has taken us through his CV. So far we have his references- the changed lives of the people at Corinth. We have his qualifications to be a minister- that through Gods mercy he has seen the glory of God in Jesus Christ. And now he tells us about his previous experience!

Let's just look down briefly at this. Here is the description of the genuine gospel worker. Verses 8 and 9.

The genuine gospel worker is:

Hard pressed on every side- that is under extreme pressure. Surrounded. Feeling the pressure from so many angles. Feeling trapped perhaps. They are hard pressed.

The genuine gospel worker is perplexed- that is, they are facing situations where they are completely at a loss to know what to do next. What should they do? What direction should they take?

The genuine gospel worker is persecuted- that is, they are being pursued, running from the enemies advance.

The genuine gospel worker is struck down- at their very lowest point, left for dead, depressed, their hope is fading.

That's Paul's previous experience. Does that sound like a powerful ministry to you? Would you employ a man like that for your leader!? Does some of that sound like your experience too?

Well says Paul, that is what the authentic gospel ministry looks like. It looks like weakness. Doesn't it?

And yet, we have missed out the "buts". Look down at verse 8 again.

Under extreme pressure, **but not crushed.**

Completely at a loss to know what to do- **but not despairing, not completely lost.**

Running from the enemies advance- **but not left behind.**

(The picture there may be like you see in those war films where the army is retreating and one soldier falls. But he is not left to the mercy of the enemy, some brave soldier goes back to pick him up and drag him to safety).

Struck down, depressed, left for dead, **but not losing all hope.**

It may seem that you would be defeated. It may look like you have been defeated, but you are not. Why? Because God's power is at work. You are a weak clay-pot gospel-worker, but there is treasure inside the clay-pot. It is the treasure of the ministry of the gospel, the gospel that changes lives. And the point here is this: our lives look like weakness, they look like fragile clay pots, **so that** God's power is more clearly and obviously seen.

It is an awesome power. The word there is the same word that we get our word dynamite from. It is explosive. It is mighty. It is like a volcanic eruption that blows the top off a mountain. There is no mistaking where the power comes from, not from the clay pot that's for sure. And it is not just enough power, it is all-surpassing power, extravagant, excessive, over the top power. This is what is at work in the true gospel worker. This mighty power, transforming us in our weakness and transforming those who listen.

Paul goes on to talk about how this ministry brings life out of death. The clay-pot ministry looks so weak it seems like it is going to die. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, it is as though we are dying too. As we get closer to Jesus, we experience more of what he experienced. Just as Jesus faced weakness and rejection and suffering in his life, that is what we experience too, says Paul. But we experience this so that his life may be revealed in us. It is so that his resurrection power will be at work. And it is at work now! This life from the dead, grave-busting power is at work now and will be at work later. And as we go through this time of suffering, this time of weakness, this time that looks like we have been defeated, we experience God's life-giving power, but not only us. You also, you Corinthian believers, you also know this life-giving power because in a sense we have suffered and it is for your benefit. It changes us, but it also changes you.

That is sometimes our experience isn't it, when we preach or teach the gospel- it changes us. Sometimes that is pretty painful, but we trust that it also changes those who listen.

I realise that those verses 10-12 are pretty hard to grasp and I am sure there is so much more that could be said. They may also seem a bit foreign to us who enjoy so much security and experience so little in the way of persecution.

But let me read to you from this book "Faith under Fire" which was written by Andrew White, who is the vicar of a church in Baghdad.

He recalls the awful events of 31 October 2010 when al-Qa'ida terrorists entered the Syrian Catholic church in Baghdad and shot people dead. They scattered grenades and finally blew people up with a suicide bomb. In all, 58 people were killed.

He says, "I didn't know whether people would dare to return to church the following week- they were so frightened. Many wanted to leave. As ever, many were determined to stay, but their number has decreased.

The week after this tragedy I spoke on Romans 8.18-21

"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us"

He then says: " We really do suffer with Christ, but we really do see His glory. We know that whatever happens, the Lord will sustain us and help us through our difficulties. The resounding message from the congregation was that they would not be deterred by the threats and intimidation because Jesus was still with them. Despite the terrible things that have happened, they (and I) have resolved to stay. We know that the Lord is here, and His Spirit is with us"

We do not lose heart. It may seem like weakness, we may feel isolated, but God is at work. So we do not give up. We don't walk away. We don't lose our passion.

So, as I finish, let me ask: has it been a tough year for us as a church?

Did you struggle to know what to say in your Christmas letter or when people asked you- how are things at church?

Does it feel like we are facing extreme difficulty?

Does it look like weakness?

Are you perplexed about the situation and what the new year will look like?

I think the answer is yes. Yes to all those questions.

And so what will we do in 2014? What is our plan?

Well don't lose heart! Don't stop preaching Christ! Don't let's think that because its hard or it looks weak that we are doing something wrong. Remember that we are not defeated, that in our weakness the power of God is at work and is more clearly seen.