

**St Brandon's      2 June 24**

**2 Cor 4:5-12; Mark 2:23 – 3:6**

(Note: there was a change in the readers invited to contribute at the end of the sermon.)

## **SERMON**

I love getting letters, usually! I'm not so keen on ones from utility companies, the ones which used to come in brown envelopes.... But I love letters from friends, notes written in birthday cards, postcards... though more often we get news via email and social media and holiday photos sent by Whats App... times have changed!

In New Testament times, letters were really valuable, handwritten with expensive materials, read and re-read, shared and kept, not deleted at the touch of a button. The collection of letters- epistles- we have in our Bibles is a fantastic resource for learning what life was like for the first Christians as the good news of Jesus spread across the Roman Empire, following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Throughout this month we'll be reading excerpts from Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the church in Corinth, from Chapters 4,5 and 6 and 8. Over the weeks we'll build up a picture of why Paul wrote what he did, and what we can learn from it today.

In suggesting this to our preaching team I've been influenced by a book published last year by the Dean of Durham, Philip Plyming, called 'Being Real'. I commend it to you- it's not a long read, but a fascinating one and I will quote from it this week and next.

So here we go with some background to Corinth in the first century CE, actually new Roman Corinth, for the city was

re-founded by Julius Caesar after the ancient Greek city was destroyed had been a Roman general in 146 BCE. This new Corinth, where Paul spent at least 18 months, was bursting with energy. Paul lived there, he didn't just pop in from times to time: he earned his living as a tent and sail maker, for Corinth was a key trading port between East and West. He preached and taught, prayed and shared his faith, established a

church, then wrote letters back to them in the succeeding years- probably 4 letters, of which we have just two, and they are only one side of the correspondence!

In Corinth, as in the other places Paul went, he really got to know the city and its people, and they were as different from each other as Durham from Newcastle, Glasgow from Edinburgh, Liverpool from Manchester. Paul knew Corinth and Corinthians, he knew the place was all about **success, status, strength** and **speaking** (impressively in public). Physical prowess was prized highly and the Isthmian Games took place in Corinth every other year, ranking alongside the ancient Olympics in attracting competitors from all over Greece, who sought to win the victor's crown and with it, heroic celebrity status.

Such celebrity was also afforded to public speakers – the media influencers of their day, who in first century Corinth were highly skilled in persuasion – spin – to the extent that argument and honesty has become less important than rhetoric- not what you say, but the way you say it, if you like. Reading this letter throughout a general election campaign may well strike familiar chords for us!

In summary, Corinth was aspirational: in this new city you could rise quickly from humble roots, including slavery, to wealth and power. Not unusual in a Roman city, but, as the Dean puts it:

*Corinth was a city where social mobility was more pronounced, where status anxiety was more problematic, where self-display was more prevalent (because recognition mattered more) and where social competition was fiercer. This was the story of Corinth... ('Being Real', pp 23-4)*

The question the book poses and seeks to answer is this:

If that's what Corinth was like, what stories did Paul tell to convince them to follow Jesus Christ? Surely he wrote about success, about his amazing conversion experience on the road to Damascus, about church growth, miracles, signs and wonders he had both witnessed and performed as the number one Super Apostle sent out from Jerusalem to spread the gospel...Paul had plenty with which to impress them... but he didn't.

This is where we home in on today's passage, one of six 'hardship narratives' in the what we call 1 and 2 Corinthians.

Paul chooses, again and again, rather than 'bigging himself up', as the Corinthians would, to be vulnerable, imperfect, struggling, human and real, as he writes about his suffering as an apostle of Christ.

Today's reading from this 'hardship story' in 2 Corinthians chapter 4 is also, as many of you will know, part of the passage we're reading all this year in PMC- the Partnership for Missional Church programme we are undertaking.

Having benefitted greatly from reading and discussing these verses with others, I thought I'd ask our PMC core team if they'd like to offer their thoughts today. Rather wonderfully, they said yes - Colin and Jane, please do join me at the lectern.

As you listen to these insights, you might also like to refer back to your blue readings sheet. Once Colin and Jane have spoken we'll have a short pause, then a final prayer.

**1. Colin – firstly for Alison Moore:**

The passage is full of intense / exaggerated / ott images and statements. The phrase I am always drawn back to is the famous 'treasure in clay jars' bit, with its explanation that the 'all-surpassing power' is from God not us. It speaks to me of it being okay to be ordinary people, ordinary church, with ordinary challenges that seem to get in the way (individually and collectively) - because actually the 'all-surpassing power' is from and of God and our job is to be open and human and ordinary and expect to see God at work in all kinds of ways.

PAUSE

**2. Jane**

My choice was Verse 10

'We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body'

As Christians, we believe Jesus died and rose again and his Spirit is in each one of us, whether we are here in Church or not. Each week at Communion we 'top up' our

reserves of his power for the week in the sacraments of bread and wine. We want Jesus' life to be revealed in our body by our activities and actions. Our PMC focus of 'meeting and connecting generously to all who are newer to our village and church' is an opportunity to display and live this out in practice in our daily lives.

This involves thinking about how to work with others and community groups more effectively for God's Glory. Maybe something of what motivates us will intrigue and inspire others.

PAUSE

### **3. Colin**

Reading our passage a few days ago, I was also drawn to verse 10 b, ". . . so that His life may also be revealed in our body,"

It seemed to me that this was the purpose and motivation for our involvement in the PMC project. But "body" could mean our individual bodies, the body of regular worshipers in Church, or possibly the entire village - if we are successful in melding together all the separate groups.

I felt that this had implications for how we relate to the unchurched villagers. We should be careful not to be seen as a "holier than thou" group on a mission. Everybody living in the village and associated with it is a Child of God and, I believe, regardless of whether they come to Church or not, they all have a spark of divinity within them. Our purpose should be a fusion of the Church and the village groups to become one body, which we should be happy for non church-goers to call a community or perhaps a neighbourhood, while we, in our terminology, will know it to be the body of Christ

PAUSE

#### **Final prayer:**

God of our reality,

expand and illumine our understanding of you, ourselves and others. Help us to be real, and in our struggles to experience your 'all surpassing power' in the clay jars of our ordinary lives, so that your light and love shine through.

**Amen.**