

2 CorinthINTHIANS 10:1-11  
MEEKNESS AND GENTLENESS

There's a war going on; have you noticed? It is a battle for hearts and minds - for our hearts and minds and for the hearts and minds of the people of the world. There is nothing new in this battle; it is not comfortable place to be; it is a battle not of our making, but one in which we are totally caught up, like it or not. This battle is taking place in:

□ The Public square – read the letters' pages of the newspapers and you will see the public debate, the battle for what to believe. There are those who will tell us that God is simply a delusion, something that people have made up because we're afraid of the dark and that as soon as possible all religion should be consigned to the dustbin of history. We are a modern society, a progressive society that has no place for religion, or church, or the old ways! This week's debate on council prayers is one example of this battle, where some argue that religion should be excluded. Others disagree and stand up for the Church and for faith, as a faith worth battling for.

□ The Church itself – again some will argue that the church needs to move with the times and adapt its values and standards to the age in which we live; we know better than Jesus! The Bible has some wisdom in its pages, but so much of it can be disregarded because comes from a bygone age. If we get rid of the supernatural bits of our religion, Christianity will be more palatable to a modern world – or so the argument goes! Again there are others who disagree; the faith is worth battling for.

□ In us – there are two forces pulling at our hearts and minds, and pulling us in different directions. On the one hand, our instinctive human nature wants to govern our lives, for us to be masters of our own destiny, to do things our way. On the other, the Spirit of God is prompting us to make Jesus Lord of our lives and to be the kind of people that Jesus wants us to be. There are two different sets of values that are being fought over in our hearts. Whose will we be? Will we be our own people? Will we be Jesus' people?

What are the weapons in that war? In the public square debate, there is aggression ("We're better than you are; more people think like us now!"), ridicule ("You don't still believe that out-dated nonsense, do you?") and vitriol, personal attacks on those who dare to oppose the atheist, secular steamroller. It is all designed to make Christians go away, slink away quietly into the Corinthner and give up the fight. In Church debates, you can see something of the same weapons being used to discredit 'opponents' and the different point of view in order to win the argument. In the Middle Ages, the Church adopted that model of evangelism; we call it the crusades, when armies crossed the continent to beat the heathen into submission by force! It was wrong then; it is wrong now! Beating people into submission may be the way of the world in which we live; we may be on the receiving end of that tactic, but it is not the weapon of the gospel.

Paul's ministry was caught up in this battle for the hearts and minds of the people of Corinth; he even uses the language of warfare. People had come to Corinth and were ridiculing him, trying to undermine his ministry by making fun of him personally. Is Paul's gospel to be believed or is the other message more credible? Who are we to believe: Paul or these others? There are no small issues at stake here; we are dealing with hugely important issues. Is faith a good thing? Does faith add anything to my life? Which voice do I listen to? In midst of all these questions, can we be confident and strong? Can we find a way to be Christians and to commend Christ to the world? Of course, we can!

People had come to Corinth. They were hugely impressive people; power and prestige were the qualities at the heart of their ministry; they were wealthy perhaps. They came to Corinth to persuade people of two things: they were right and Paul was wrong! They were probably Jews who wanted to make sure that this new Christian Church died before it really got started and so they followed Paul around trying to undo the work he had already done. Their tactic: a personal attack on the apostle. Here's how it was done: "Paul is a craven dog who barks loudly at a safe distance" but who is timid, even cowardly when you see him face-to-face! He's weak, powerless, nothing. He will write letters in which he will say strong things – "*his letters...*" (10:10) He's not had the speech-training in the schools of Athens and elsewhere, he is unimpressive; why would you believe him? He is, in fact, two different people: he is one thing in his letters, but quite another in personal contact. Besides, his message is equally unimpressive and not worth giving a second thought.

The World has two weapons that it uses against the Church: first of all, cruelty and oppression, trying to destroy the Church and Christians by persecution, putting Christians in prison or to death, bombing or burning churches; some are determined to wipe Christians out across the world. That hasn't worked because that kind of persecution has so often served only to stiffen Christian resolve. Secondly, cunning ploys that seem quite harmless, but are really quite insidious; they undermine faith and are designed to destroy faith from the inside out; since violence hasn't worked, the world devises other weapons to destroy the Church and its witness in the world. Their aim: "*we demolish...*" (10:5a) These strongholds are set against God, to take away the knowledge of God in Jesus: either blast Church off face of earth, or eat away at its heart and take away its faith from the inside.

How do we react to this battle? What are Christians to do? *The Untouchables* film was on TV recently, the story of Elliot Ness and Al Capone; there is a scene in the film where Sean Connery's cop character asks Ness what he is prepared to do to win: "You wanna know how to get Capone? They pull a knife, you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue. That's the Chicago way! And that's how you get Capone. Now do you want to do that? Are you ready to do that? I'm offering you a deal. Do you want this deal?" Christians are tempted at times to use the same tactics as the world in order to win. I heard of Christian pastors in the US who are trying to persuade people to believe them, so they buy more impressive and more expensive suits; we can write letters to *The Scotsman* that are equally vitriolic; we try to win the debate with more impressive and weightier arguments than our opponents. Are we trying to convert the world by a modern form of the Crusades?

There is a theme in 2 Corinthians 10 that I find hugely powerful and quite different from all of this; this is the way of the gospel of grace. "*By the...*" (10:1) These are two words that have similar meanings: gentleness, humility, graciousness, meekness, considerateness – these are the qualities of Jesus on which Paul has chosen to land. These are the qualities of Jesus that Paul hopes mark his own ministry, his demeanour, all of his dealings with all of the people he has met; these are the qualities of Jesus that we find compelling and attractive. For much of this letter so far and for the rest of it, Paul will dwell on his weakness; he will tell us of his sufferings and of his thorn in the flesh; it is this man, in all his weaknesses and troubles, that God has used and will continue to use. It is not a strong, powerful apostle, but a weak apostle, the marks of whose ministry are gentleness and meekness, through whom God is at work in Corinth and in the world. "*For though...*" (10:3,4) The gentleness and meekness of Christ is force enough to

demolish these strongholds and draw people to Jesus all over again. “*We demolish...*” (10:5) The only force in the world that is able to change a human heart and a person’s mind and will is the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus.

“*You are...*” (10:7a) What did they see on the surface? They saw Paul, a man who knew his own insufficiency, a humble man, forbearing of all the faults and failings of the new, young, emerging Church; they saw all of that in Paul and thought that was all there was to see. He is unimpressive face-to-face; he likes to write stern letters. What more is there? “Look beneath the surface and what do you see?” We see people coming to faith in Jesus; we see people whose every thought is captive to be obedient to Jesus as Lord; we see people growing in their faith; we see a people who belong to Christ; we see a Church existing in Corinth that wasn’t there just a few years before. Take a look at these obvious facts; this is the testimony of Paul’s ministry; the gentleness and meekness of Christ is effective; these qualities in the apostle have drawn people to Jesus; these are the weapons of battle that have demolished strongholds by the power of God.

We belong to Christ – be clear about that; we are a people who belong to Jesus, because He is gracious, gentle and compassionate. From that starting-point, the Church is made up of people who are weak and flawed; we are not perfect people and we won’t persuade people to follow Jesus by trying to pretend that we are perfect or that we have all the answers and everything sorted. We are people who know our weaknesses and failings and that knowledge makes us humble; we should be marked by the gentleness, meekness, humility of Jesus in all that we are and do. Gentleness and meekness are qualities to have in us, qualities that should mark all that we are and say and the way in which we say it! Here’s a wonderful thing: God uses us; God works through people like us to draw others to Jesus. God uses weak, broken people, people who reflect the gentleness and humility of Jesus, genuine people with no airs and graces, people with nothing to show off about in ourselves, who are not not powerful, strong or aggressive – God uses people like us to build His Church and to draw people to Jesus. Gentleness and humility don’t sound like very good tactics in any battle, but who would have said a man crucified on cross could be the Saviour of the world? Gentleness and humility should mark our ways; we should be the living embodiment of the message of the gospel of grace.

I’m not sure how important it is to win the battle in the public square, to have more of our letters in the press than theirs, or to have the last word in any argument. Winning arguments very rarely brings people to faith in Jesus. I would love to win the battle for the heart and soul of the Church; I think that a secularised Church is empty and has nothing to offer the world. I also wish that the battle going on inside me was over, but I guess that won’t happen till the day I die; we are still a work in progress as the battle between the Spirit and our human nature rages on. The mission of God in our world is to bless people’s hearts and minds with good things, and to draw people to Jesus; we have a part to play in that mission: our prayer, our faith, telling people the stories of Jesus, being people who are marked by the gentleness and humility of Jesus – these are our weapons of battle. In moment, our closing hymn will be *Soldiers of Christ* – sing it remembering these are our weapons for battle. We need to repent of aggression, ridicule, power politics, brow-beating, and foot-in-the-door tactics. “*By the...*” (10:1) Let us be the living embodiment of Jesus in our community!