

2 CORINTHIANS 2:12-3:6
DANGER! GOD AT WORK.

When I was a student training for ministry, one course we did took us to visit lots of different churches in the city. We would attend the morning or the evening service and then spend time asking the minister questions about the service, or his ministry, or the Church. One visit we made was to Mayfield Church where Bill Macdonald was minister; he went on to become Moderator of the General Assembly and was a well-known figure in Church circles in those days. As part of the conversation after the service, one class member asked him "Sir, do you consider yourself to be an asset to this Church?" The rest of us wanted to hide under the table. Wilfred was from the Methodist Church in Nigeria, and was used to people being moved after 5 years ministry and Bill had been 20 years and more at Mayfield at that time, so that was the motive for the question. It is a great question, if a bit challenging.

There is a huge debate in the Church at present about this very relationship between the Church and its ministers. The plan says by 2014 the Church of Scotland needs to have only 1000 ministers in charges because that's all we can afford; at present there are 1200; so every area is planning for the future and is trying to work out how to get the numbers down; Edinburgh has to lose 15 or 16 jobs in next 3 years and that raises all sorts of questions about the relationship between congregations and their ministers. It has spin-off effects on way in which the Church describes that relationship between congregations and ministers and the way ministers are paid etc. It is hugely unsettling for both congregations and ministers and some congregations have already almost decided that if they are losing their minister, the congregation will die! It creates a huge amount of anxiety and not a little suspicion.

It does raise the question: 'what are ministers for?' Are we an asset to the Church or the congregation? There are still some Christian churches that don't have 'ministers' or 'pastors' as leaders, though it is a fairly small number. Other Churches give them other names - priests, vicars etc – but the question is the same no matter what we're called. Am I here to boost my ego by becoming well-known or well-thought of? Am I here to have you dance to my tune? Are you here to help me run the Church? Or am I here to keep you happy, tell you what you want to hear, tell you nice stories to entertain you? Of course, it's much deeper than that. Like every other aspect of the Christian life and Church we have to let the Bible shape this relationship, otherwise it will die. We need to sit together under the Bible's teaching and let it shape our relationship, minister and congregation together, so that we honour God together.

Our reading from 2 Corinthians does that for us. It shows us all kinds of things, more than we have time to consider this morning, but there are two main themes: first of all, the relationship between the apostle and the church; and secondly, the influence of the Church in the world around it. These will fill our time this morning. Paul's relationship with the Church in Corinth is a model for churches everywhere; what he says about the church's influence in their city is also a model for us as we relate to the people and communities around us. In all of this, there is one central key that we need to always remember and so easily forget: we are God's people and God is at work in us! We are here because the Spirit of God is at work in us, all of us, together; we are here because Christ has done something significant for us and in us, all of us together. God is at work in us – how good a truth that is and how challenging!

Paul uses two pictures to describe his relationship with the church in Corinth:

1. the triumphal procession – in Rome, after an army general had won a war, he was entitled to a 'triumph' (not a motorbike, or a car!), a procession through the great

city of Rome. It was a way of celebrating his great victories and of him showing off the spoils of war. So picture the scene: the streets of Rome are lined with crowds, cheering; through the streets comes this huge army, thousands of soldiers who have just come back from fighting Rome's enemies in some far-off corner of the Empire; at the centre of the procession is the general in his chariot, feted, celebrated by the people as the conquering hero. There is another part of that procession - the spoils of war, perhaps chests of gold and silver, perhaps other prizes that the general has won; certainly there would be prisoners of war, turned into slaves, brought back to Rome to be slaves in the general's house or to be sold in the slave markets for extra profit. You hear the sound of this procession and see the great sights as it moves through the streets. You smell the aroma of the spices being burnt at the side of the street as part of the celebration.

Paul uses this picture: "*Now thanks...*" (2:14) That's the easy bit; the hard part of this is to know why he uses the picture and what he wants to tell us from it. There are all sorts of theories. Some suggest that this is about being the Church triumphant, that the church shares in the triumph of God in Christ and that we should show off that triumph to the world around us and so we can speak in triumphalist language about our faith and our victory and how great we are as the victory belongs to us. I'm not sure about that! The explanation that I like better is this: Paul has seen reversals in his ministry, things have not gone according to plan; he has gone to Troas and his friend has not turned up and he feels let down. He preaches a message of a crucified Messiah, yet his opponents sweep all before them, seemingly more powerful, and more popular; so he presents as a sorry, defeated figure. Yet, despite the appearance of weakness, Paul is being led by God; he knows that he is God's captive slave, yet he is being led in this triumphal procession by God; God honours Paul's faithful, sacrificial service; God honours the ministry characterised by the cross and crucifixion. Paul seems lost and defeated, but God is at work; God will triumph!

At times, the Church uses the word 'apostolic' to describe itself. That doesn't mean that we have people around today who are apostles; Paul and the others were one-off apostles chosen by God. But today's church walks in their footsteps. It is so easy for us to develop a defeat-mentality, that the world around us is anti-church, so we cut sorry, defeated figures, if we can give a Church a personality. What are we to do? Are we to learn a new language, to be triumphalist and boast about our victory and how we will win out in the end? Or do we learn something else from Paul? We learn again the concept of faithful service, the notion of sacrificial service that is Christ-centred, humble, and cross-shaped in which we crucify our pride and our ego to serve God and others. We do that, knowing that God is at work in the world through our service. God honours our humble, cross-shaped service.

That's the whole point of 'aroma'! "*For we...*" (2:15f) Spices burning at the side of the street told people that triumph was coming. The spices were not seen, but certainly smelled, the impact was felt. The Gospel has an effect; our Christian witness has an effect. Some people will love the gospel and will come to Christ through our witness; other people will react against what they hear or see and will reject the gospel and Christian witness. The reality is that the Christian message is always met in the shape of the messenger; "people reach their decisions about Christ on account of those in whom the message is embodied." (Barnett) 90% of people who came forward at Billy Graham crusades said that they had seen some person live a Christian life and that had impressed them! The Gospel is seen in flesh and blood. Our challenge is to live out that gospel faithfully, to preach gospel faithfully. It will have its impact; you can't see the smell, but you know it's there! God is at work through us and even if we seem defeated, if the cross seems a silly message, if

humility and self-sacrifice seem the wrong tactics to our pride and our ego, these are the ways of God and God is at work as we live these ways.

2. Letters of recommendation – When you apply for a job, you will ask a friend to give you a reference; you will always ask someone who you know will say good things about you! Though the best references are always honest, someone who sees the good points and the flaws! What about Church – what would we like people to say about our Church? Being honest, what are our good points? Our flaws? Paul is being accused of writing his own reference, of blowing his own trumpet and commending his own ministry! People visiting a new church, would come with a letter of recommendation from someone else, a famous churchman, a leader of another church; because they had these letters, they would be accepted by the church they'd come to visit. There are still churches in Scotland that you will only get into as a visitor if you come with a letter of recommendation from the right person!

Christopher Wren is buried in St Paul's and in Latin above his tomb it says: "Reader, if you seek his monument look around you." Of course, he was the architect of the building; the building is his monument. Paul's credentials are people not paper: "*You yourselves...*" (3:2f) The people are a human letter, engraved on Paul's heart; not carried in his luggage to get lost, but a permanent letter, an intimate letter written in his heart. This relationship is about more than friendship; Paul's only care is for the well-being of the Christians in Corinth; he doesn't really care about himself, but he cares deeply that these Christians continue in their faith, continue to follow Jesus and he will do anything in his power to make sure they live by faith. This is not something Paul has manufactured: "*You show...*" (3:3) God is at work, the letter comes from Christ, written in Paul's heart by the Spirit. My sole concern as your pastor is your welfare. Everything I do as your minister, I do out of a concern for you. I make mistakes at times and don't always get it right, but my concern is always for your well-being and don't let anyone tell you otherwise; my concern is to protect and enhance your reputation in our communities, that people think well of you. That will always be my aim as I preach the gospel; there will be times when that preached gospel hurts, but I came across this prayer written by RM M'Cheyne: "Lord, do in me first what I am asking you to do in this congregation. Apply the preaching to my life that I am seeking to have applied in this people you have given me."

"People are not here to help the minister run the Church; the Minister is here to help the people be Church." God is at work in my ministry here; that is not a boast, nor my ego talking, but the gospel reality, often much to my surprise. God is at work through our Christian witness in our communities, part of the same gospel reality. God is at work in us as together we try to be Church. This is a shared privilege – we are the people of God together. It is also a shared challenge, that we live as the people of God. We tell people about Jesus; we show people Jesus as the gospel is embodied in us, like it or not! "*Our competence...*" (3:5) God is at work in us; this is not our doing, not our achievement, not our glory, but God is at work in us. Let's not be sorry for ourselves, nor be triumphalist in our language that we shall win the day, but be faithful, humble servants of Jesus, living cross-shaped lives, putting to death our pride and our ego and living as servants of Christ and of one another. Together let us listen for God's word, together serve Him, together tell others about Jesus, together live for Jesus, together follow Him, together love one another and others; together let us be the Church!