

2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-18  
THREE-WORD SUNDAY!

Simon Mayo is the host of the Radio 2 tea-time show, called *Drivetime*. Like most radio shows there's audience participation and Simon asks his audience to text him with three words that sum up their day. So he has "Three Word Monday" or whatever day it happens to be. You are asked to sum up your day in three words? "Dinner tonight curry"; "New Kitchen installed"; or as we heard on Monday "Toilet training today"; I presume the same person texted again on Wednesday "Still toilet training" and you can feel a mother's pain as she is trying to toilet-train her child. It focuses the mind to try to sum up your day in three words and some of these contributions reflect the way the day has been and that it has been good, or sometimes how bad it has been; some of them tell you what the person is looking forward to doing once they get home after a day at work. Some people are really quite clever in the way they use their three words! It's just a bit of fun, really!

Can you sum up the Christian message in three words? What do Christians believe? What does the Church have to say to the world? Can you do it in just three words? It's impossible! Well, you might think so. After all, the bible is 66 books, millions of words and many of them so significant that you wouldn't want to lose them. Can the Christian message be summed up in three words? Well, actually it can. The Christian message has been summed up in three words from very early on in the life of the Church; the early Christians used just three words to sum up the faith they believed and professed and the first Christian profession of faith was just three words long. It is a simple profession of their own faith and a simple message to the world. It got them into trouble at times and led to some big questions being asked of what these three words meant, but we still use these three words as our profession of faith. Have you guessed what these three words are yet? "Jesus is Lord!"

"*We do...*" (4:5) Paul has been thinking aloud in this letter about his ministry and about the ministry the Church in Corinth has to the city around it. He has come under attack from his enemies, from people who are trying to undermine his ministry and make people believe other things. Some were even accusing him of blowing his own trumpet, that Paul is trying to make people follow him. But Paul says, the heart of his message is simple – "Jesus is Lord". He is not trying to attract people to himself and make people think that Paul is great; instead he is trying to attract people to Jesus and make people think Jesus is great. The heart of the Christian message is Jesus; the church's job today is to help people see what Jesus is like, and lead people to believe in Jesus; the church's job is to tell the world that Jesus is Lord. Paul saw himself as no more than a servant, a servant of Jesus and a servant of the Church as he told people that "Jesus is Lord"

That simple three-word message has profound implications for life. To call Jesus Lord for the first century Christian meant a challenge to Caesar who also called himself 'Lord'; the Roman soldier had to swear allegiance to Caesar as lord, but the Christian Roman soldier couldn't do that and often ended in prison because he would only swear allegiance to Jesus as Lord. To call Jesus "Lord" is to acknowledge that Jesus is the One we trust, serve and follow and that Jesus' teachings, His example, His ways, shape the way we live life. This is quite different from the way we naturally think, which is to put self first and make 'me' lord of my own life, doing what I want, living in the way I like, doing what suits me and to put with anything else. To call Jesus Lord is to change all of that and is to say that Jesus is at the centre, that Jesus' ways are King and that I seek to live life in His ways. There is a clash of values when Jesus is Lord and it's not always a popular message to hear and understand.

The Church has always faced two temptations when people have not wanted to hear that Jesus is Lord; both of them were faced by Paul and we face them today: “*We have...*” (4:2) The first temptation is to use underhand methods just to get results; churches have been accused of manipulating people and using the language of spin in order to get people to believe the message and that kind of underhand manipulation is completely unacceptable. The second temptation is to change the message, to distort the message to make it seem more acceptable, more palatable for people. For example, some find it hard to understand and accept the miraculous part of the gospels including the resurrection and so parts of the Church have tried to take out the miracles and explain the resurrection in some other way, just to make it more acceptable to a sceptical world. Paul had a different strategy: “*On the contrary...*” (4:2b) and as we do that “*God who...*” (4:6) The Gospel is plainly set out, that Jesus is Lord – some will love it and embrace it and believe it and it will bring light and grace to their lives; for others it will mean nothing!

Three more words take us into world of *Time Team*. In September 2009, an amateur with a metal detector searching in a field in Staffordshire uncovered gold worth £millions. He found about 1500 pieces adding up to about 5kg of gold; there were pieces of weapons and crosses; it was the largest ever hoard of Anglo-Saxon gold found in this country. It made huge headlines at the time and the exact location was kept secret for a time, but the gold is now on display in Birmingham. It didn't appear to happen in this case, but so often these gold finds are in old clay pots or old wooden boxes; some people hid their treasure deliberately in clay pots so that no-one look twice at them, that they would think there is nothing of value here! The pots and boxes are worth very little but the contents are priceless. Three words: “*Jars of clay*” – it is the name of a restaurant in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, which when I was there 6 years ago was run by woman who had flat in Slateford Rd! it is a small world. However, this is not about a café; this is about people.

Paul: “*we have...*” (4:7) The Gospel is the treasure and Paul is the jar of clay; he goes on to tell us what he means by that when he describes something of his life-experience. “*We are...*” (v8f) There are times when he has felt at end of his tether and life has just been so hard; there are times when he has been hounded by the things that life has thrown at him, and even by other people; there are times when he hasn't known which way to turn next in life; there are times when he has been persecuted for his faith, in prison and beaten up; there are times when he has felt cornered and hounded. What do we see? We see a man living a normal human life! We see a man facing up to life in its difficulties and hardships, a man wrestling with life that is far from easy, yet a man who continues to believe in Jesus and tell others about Jesus, a man sustained by God's power and grace – “*this all...*” (4:7) Life is ordinary, humdrum, even hard; he is like the clay pot, nothing spectacular and special in himself, yet he has this treasure in his heart and for sharing.

His description of life could lead to doubt and despair. Twice Paul says “*we do...*” (4:16) “*So, Paul, if this is your life and you are hard-pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down; what is that keeps you going? Why not just lose heart and give up?*” It's what we might do, I suspect! Because Paul sees something else, another piece of truth that has two strands to it woven together, he does not lose heart. First of all, “*we know...*” (4:14) Secondly “*Our light...*” (4:17) Paul sees beyond the hard things of life to something else that God has promised, that because Jesus is raised from the dead and because Jesus has gone back to heaven, we have the hope of heaven in our own hearts, the hope that we shall share Jesus' glory because that's what God has promised to us. So the hope of glory and the power of God at work in him sustain him when life is hard. So he can be hard-pressed, but his spirit is not crushed; so he

can be perplexed, but not in despair, because he has this hope in his heart that centres on Jesus and that nothing can take away from him.

It is so easy to lose heart. Individually, that is true, especially when life is hard. There are times in our lives when everything just seems to go against us, when one thing after another is hard, the news always seems to be bad, the things that happen to us all seem to be hard things. It is so easy then to lose heart, even to turn our faces to the wall and just give up on life; or to give up on faith – where is this good God? Why does God not answer my prayers? Does God still love me? It is so easy to give up, to lose heart and drift away from faith.

It is so easy for a Church to lose heart collectively; people don't appear to want what we're offering, especially if there are no new people coming through the doors and the people we talk to seem not to want to know the gospel; or our service in the community is not being well-received by that community; or the events we arrange and organise are not well-attended even by people from within the Church. It is so easy for the Church to lose heart, to metaphorically shut the doors and proclaim themselves dead.

It is so easy to lose heart and think of ourselves as jars of clay but without the treasure; to see ourselves as of little worth and value, as people whom no-one loves, certainly not God! We get into this downward spiral of despair that thinks poorly of ourselves and of life itself.

How can we not to lose heart? Remember the treasure! God's all-surpassing power is at work in us to sustain and support us, to help and strengthen us. Jesus is raised from the dead and we will be raised with Him to share His glory, glory that far outweighs anything we know of life now. That's the treasure we have in Jesus; having that treasure, we should not lose heart. That is far easier to say than to do, yet Paul's hope was not an easy hope; his was a hope that had been tested in the heat of real human hardships. As he spoke to people about Jesus, his experience of life gave his gospel sincerity, reality, it was earthed in the real world, because for people in this real world Jesus is Saviour and Lord.

Have you got a version of a "Three-word Sunday"? "Glad preacher finished!" Let me offer you three other versions of it. First, "Jesus is Lord"; this is the heart of our faith, the simplest profession of Christian faith; and the heart of the message that we would tell the world. Secondly, "Jars of clay" – this is our life, us; on the outside nothing significant, nothing spectacular, nothing out of ordinary and our experience of life is just like everyone else's; we are not perfect and there is nothing about being a Christian that makes us immune from hardships! Thirdly "remember the treasure" – inside we have treasure beyond price; "*God who...*" (4:6) There is treasure beyond price for us and its for sharing; don't lose heart, but remember the treasure; don't keep it to yourself, but share the treasure with others. Take these "Three-word Sundays and hold on to them: Jesus is Lord; jars of clay; remember the treasure – they tell you everything you need to know to keep the faith, persevere and not lose heart!