

2 CORINTHIANS 6:1-13
BE THE GOSPEL

Rodney Smith was an evangelist, born in London, who conducted evangelistic campaigns in the UK and the USA in the early part of the twentieth century. He became a Christian at the age of 15; he was an early officer in the Salvation Army; he served with the YMCA during the First World War, ministering to the troops, and was awarded the MBE for his service. He crossed the Atlantic some 45 times to carry out evangelistic campaigns to tell people about Jesus. He was a Methodist minister. I had never heard of him before this week but I tell you about Rodney Smith because I want to introduce this sermon with a quote from him. He once said, "There are five gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and the Christian – but most people never read the first four!" The only way by which many people will see or know anything of Jesus is what they see in the Christian, is what they see in us and/or hear from us!

Some years ago the Church of Scotland did some research into the reasons people give for not coming to Church. There were all kinds of answers and one of them was all to do with Christians. The research was published as a book called *Believe it or not* and the title of chapter 8 is "it's the church that puts me off!" The chapter begins with a quote from one person who took part: "Christianity has not been very Christian!" People see Christians being imperfect and churches being divided and they decide that they don't want to know Christianity because of what they see in us. We might feel that is a harsh judgement, but nonetheless there it is; this is the other side of Rodney Smith's coin; do people see Jesus in us, or are people turned away from Jesus by what they see in us?

These two ideas are in 2 Corinthians 6. Paul is reflecting more on his ministry and on the impact of that ministry on the Church in general and on the people of Corinth in particular. Some people had come to Corinth and were questioning Paul's credentials to be an apostle, challenging his right to be called an apostle and they may well have been trying to tell the church not to listen to him! Paul describes what life and ministry are like for him; what kind of obstacle course has he had to negotiate as both Christian and apostle? So he says "this is what life is like" and writes about the hard things as well as the glory of his faith and his calling. We could pick out lots of these phrases as worthy of comment and we'd be here all day trying to make sense of them all, but for me there is one that stands out towards the end, in verse 10 Paul speaks of himself as "*poor yet...*" (2 Corinthians 6:10) Paul was not a rich man; for some he didn't even have a good reputation, but he saw life and ministry as service to others; what he had was of no matter to him; what mattered was that he had made life better for some; some are richer for knowing the grace of God that Paul had brought into their lives.

Here are these two ideas: are we servants, or are we stumbling-blocks: "*We put...*" (2 Corinthians 6:3,4)

Servants: we are even God's fellow-workers! Paul writes this lyrical piece about the many different ways we meet life, some of them troubles and problems; others of them the experiences of the good things of life and faith, the blessings of God on our lives. This is what it means to be a servant of God! There are troubles, hardships, sleepless nights as we said before, days when being a Christian is hard and days when we almost want to throw away our faith because life is too troublesome and faith and the questions it asks of us seems to make it harder! But there are some fantastic qualities here: "*sincere love, truthful speech, glory, genuine, dying yet we live on, sorrowful yet always rejoicing*" This is us at our best; this is us in our good days and by living out these qualities, Jesus is seen in us and the grace of God is shared with others. "*poor yet making many rich!*" is the way God works through us; we are His fellow-workers and He works through us in the lives of other people; we are His servants for the sake of others and other lives are enriched by our service and by the grace of God in us and through us.

Let's go back to Rodney Smith: "There are five gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and the Christian – but most people never read the first four!" People read us – what do they see? You might think that unfair because you know what life is like for you and you know what you are like and you might not think yourself a very good model, but to your family and friends that doesn't matter. You're a Christian; you come to Church; they will read you and what will they see? Do they see someone who is genuine, sincere in our love for God, for one another and other people, someone who tells the truth, who keeps on believing even when life is hard? Is that what people see? Do they see us trying to live by the values we see in Jesus, sincerely trying to put these values into practice? What do people read in us? Most of all, do they read Jesus in us? You might say "this is too much; people should not expect that of me!" Well, you may have a point; but no matter how much we protest, people read us, the fifth gospel, and do they read Jesus and grace?

Go back to the obstacle course we built earlier! We could build another one! This time the obstacles would be the things that we put in people's way, the things that stop people coming to faith, coming to Church, things that act as stumbling-blocks and obstacles. What would these be? I suspect we'd have different answers to that question; in the research I quoted earlier, the major obstacles were to do with the way in which Christians behaved, not living up to the standards and values that we profess; or the way in which churches have behaved in the past, divisions, support for causes now discredited and, in last few years, cases of child abuse! People read these things of churches and say they don't want to know because this kind of behaviour has become an obstacle and a stumbling block. Churches are discredited! Others will describe the Church as the "dullest experience we have", claiming that our services are boring, we are stuck in the past; so they stay away from anything offered by the church.

In a conversation with some friends recently we were talking about these kinds of experience of Church and the capacity that the church has for shooting ourselves in the foot. How do we shoot ourselves in the foot? The priest who takes the chance on Christmas Eve with a church full of people there who want to mark Christmas and he lambasts them for not coming to Church at other times! How do they feel? Are they ready to come back next year? There is an obstacle in their way! The family member who was missed out in list of people to thank at a church event; everyone else was mentioned but he was missed; the family has never been back to church since! An obstacle is created! The person who told their Christian friend a piece of news in confidence only to find that this piece of news has been talked about and has come back to them; a confidence was broken by someone who couldn't resist the gossip! An obstacle is created! We might want to explain these away and think that some are faintly ridiculous, but these are all real stories that I've been told by people and these are the ways in which people have been treated and have read Christians and like it or not, these have become obstacles to people being Christians!

"There are five gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and the Christian – but most people never read the first four!" What do people read in us? Are we servants to lead people to Jesus? Or are we stumbling blocks that keep people away? The truth is that we can be both, almost at the same time. There are qualities to be: be genuine, be people who have resilience and endurance, be people who are sincere in our love for others, be people who speak the truth, be people who while knowing the sorrows of life remember the love that God has for us and rejoice in His endless love. These are fantastic qualities; these are qualities that allow people to read Jesus in us; these are qualities that will draw people to Jesus when they see us being people like this. What do people read in us? We hope and pray that they read these good things and are drawn to Jesus.

Then we think – who is up to this? Jesus is in the boat, crossing the Sea of Galilee and the storm comes up. He is asleep in the back of the boat, quite unconcerned about the storm because knows it will be fine; He trusts His Father. The disciples are also there and some of them are terrified; they think they're going to die. They wake Him up, rudely, suddenly: "*Don't*

you...” (Mark 4:38) Jesus gets up and stills the storm; *“Why are...”* (Mark 4:40) These are the people Jesus called and chose to be His co-workers; these are the people He was training to be God’s fellow-workers in the world. How would you describe them? What words would you use about these men in this story? Do they seem to you to be “God’s fellow-worker” material? I guess not, but these were the people Jesus chose and these are the people that later will draw people to Jesus. How would you read them in this story? Are they people just like us?

We are all this wonderful mixture of genuine love and deep anxiety, of faith and fear, of good things and mistakes, of achievements and failure. It is us and people like us that God calls to be His fellow-workers, to be people engaged with Him in mission, to be the fifth gospel where people can read of Jesus, to be people who will serve Him and make others rich in the grace of God. This is who we are! It is a fantastic calling! It is an enormous privilege! I’m sure we’d rather be a channel of the grace of God than an obstacle in its way! What do people read in us? Do they read Jesus? Do they read of God’s grace? Do they read of salvation? Or do they read something else?