

2 CORINTHIANS 6:3-13
OPEN YOUR HEARTS...

Imagine: the Church is designing a new advertising campaign. You're being asked to devise this campaign for the Church in the 21st century in a way that will allow the Church to make a more powerful impact on Scotland. As part of this campaign you are being given two tasks: the first is to design a logo for the Church, a symbol that sums the Church up; so you need to find an image that tells people what the Church stands for, what the Church is all about. What will that logo be? What will it include? What would you use as a logo that will attract people to Church? The second task is to find a person, a face for the new campaign, someone who will sum up the Church and make an impact on people as they see the posters and the hoardings and the advertising material, a face that will attract people to the Church.

So what will that logo be? You need to find an image that conveys life and strength and power because you want people to see that the Church is a force for good in the land, or that the Church has lots to offer the world. So you need to find an image that conveys that strength and power. It is the same with the face for the campaign: like every advertising campaign you need to find an attractive face, a smiling, strong and positive face, young perhaps, full of life and vibrancy! But stop! Hold on a minute! What does that advertising campaign say? What is its subliminal message? That to be part of this Church, you have to be strong? That to be part of this Church, you have to have life sorted so that you are wonderfully happy and contented all of the time? That to be part of this Church you need to be young and beautiful?!

Here is the international Church logo – the cross! It is not a symbol of power, but of weakness; not a symbol of happiness, but of suffering; not a symbol of life being sorted, but of hardship and trouble. So why is that **the** symbol and image of the Christian faith? Because through the cross Jesus has achieved our salvation. By the cross as a place of weakness, as a place of suffering, as a place of hardship, Jesus achieved our salvation. So the Church can say to the world, “come to Jesus as you are; you don't need to have a perfect life, you don't need to be a strong person, you don't need to have everything sorted and in good order; come as you are and Jesus will love you as you are!” That's the message we have to give the world. If you're explaining the gospel to someone, to a friend, or a family member and they say to you “What does the Church believe?” or “Why do you go to Church?” what are the first two or three words you use? “You have to...” or “God has...” – if we start by saying “You have to...” then it is all about us and that we must be good people to come to God; but if we start “God has...” the door is open to anyone to come. That's why the cross is the logo that is here to stay.

What about the person? “Only a (person) who, like the apostle, is humbly awake to his own utter weakness can know and prove the total sufficiency of God's grace.” (Philip Hughes) The best advocates of the Christian gospel are not those who seem to have life sorted, but those who know their own weakness and who will say that through their weakness and hardships, God has loved them and given them grace. The person who has the trials of life written on their face, yet can still say “Jesus loves me” will have a huge impact. Do you remember the story of Joni Eareckson? She is an American woman who was seriously injured in a diving accident that left her as a quadriplegic and recently she has suffered with other illness, yet she has written her story bearing witness to the faithfulness of God, even through all of these tough times. It is a story that has had a huge impact on people right across the world. God's grace is sufficient!

Paul is reflecting on his Christian ministry and the mission of the Church. What kind of picture does he present of his ministry as an apostle? His huge concern is that his ministry never ever becomes a stumbling-block to people finding Christ. “*We put...*” (v3) There is nothing about Paul’s ministry that would make people mock or ridicule the gospel; there is nothing about him that would put people off! There is a book in the library called *Believe it or not!*; it was written in 2000 pulling together the results of a survey carried out by the Church across Scotland asking people what are the barriers to them believing in Jesus; there is a whole chapter headed “It’s the Church that puts me off!”. Whether their criticisms reflect realistic expectations of the Church, or expect Christians to be perfect, is a huge question, but nonetheless, people are put off the gospel by the way Christians behave. This is a huge challenge to us; this is the theme of 2 Corinthians 6 and is the challenge for us to consider today.

Philip Hughes again: “This movingly beautiful passage flows from the deep heart of the apostle’s knowledge and experience... it is certainly one of the high peaks not only of this remarkably human epistle but of all Paul’s writings.” There are 16 phrases here that describe the nature of Paul’s ministry, the qualities and experiences that have shaped and marked and characterised his service of God as an apostle. He is God’s servant and as such is telling the Christians in Corinth what that has meant for him. There have been times when his ministry has called for great endurance because of the troubles and hardships that he has had to face, the beatings, imprisonments and riots, the hard work, sleepless nights and hunger he has had to endure. There have been times when people have spoken badly of him, or when Churches that he knows well have treated him as a stranger; when his genuine ministry has been treated as false, and he has been seen as an impostor. In the midst of all of these hardships, Paul has persevered; endurance has been his great quality.

There have been other qualities too: he has always spoken the truth, never lies, never twisting the gospel; he has come in the strength of the Spirit and God’s power has been at work in him; he has tried to rejoice even in midst of his sorrows; when he has been poor and homeless and hunted by his enemies, even then his concern has been to make other people rich in faith and grace; even when he has had nothing materially, yet still he possesses everything in the promises of God. He has endured; he has tried to be a faithful servant of God in the midst of all of these hard things. In all of this, Paul, weak and at times feeling broken, commends the grace of God to the world. God’s grace is sufficient to help him in all of this life that he has described; still he can bear witness to the faithfulness and the grace of God, even when he is weak, vulnerable, broken. This is ministry that is shaped by the cross, ministry that reflects the cross to the world.

I will finish that quote from Paul Hughes: “(this passage) challenges every serious reader to re-examine as before God his own relationship to the crucified, risen and ascended Lord and with redoubled earnestness to dedicate his life and talents afresh to the single-minded prosecution of the cause of Christ.” The gospel is about the crucified Christ; the Church will make a real impact on the world when we rediscover this gospel and tell the world that Jesus shares our suffering, has endured hardships and troubles, was weak and vulnerable and even declared Himself God-forsaken on the cross. This crucified Saviour shapes our lives, our faith, our attitudes to ourselves and other people; Paul’s ministry is not about power and authority and domination, but is about a servant who deeply loves the people and whose only concern is for their well-being; this is cross-shaped ministry. The Church, Christians, we – our life, attitudes, the way in which we relate to the people we meet, to the people we know – all of that is to be shaped by the cross; we are to be servants to one another and to

the world. The cross is the image of Christian influence in the world, the influence of humble people serving one another and serving the poor, caring for others.

This whole theme makes last verses of today's passage all the more sad, full of pathos. Here is a Church that spiritually owed Paul everything. Acts 18 tells the story of a man who had nothing, who had to work as tent-maker just to have food to eat, who put up with Jews who became abusive; who was full of fear and anxiety, yet who stayed for 18 months in Corinth preaching the gospel, founding the Church, building these people up in their faith. Under God, there would be no Church but for Paul's dedicated, sacrificial servant ministry. Yet, listen again to what he writes: "*We have...*" (vv11-13) People who owed him everything and for whom his heart is wide open in affection and yet that love is not reciprocated; their response is begrudging, suspicious, mean-spirited, as if they have no place in their hearts for him any more. "*open...*" (v13)

Christians should be open-hearted people. Churches are like huge spiders' webs of networks of relationships; every strand of that spider's web should be characterised by an open-hearted, warm, affectionate relationship. That will mean different things with different people, but our relationships are meant always to be open-hearted. We are to be generous with one another, especially the faults and failings; we are to be concerned for one another's welfare; we are to be patient, especially with people we find it hard to get on with. We are to be open-hearted to people that we know well and that we meet every week; we are to be open-hearted with people we see, but to whom we have not yet spoken and do not yet know their names; we are to be open-hearted to the person who has come through the door for the first time and who's frightened to be here for all kinds of reasons. Being open-hearted will mean different things in each of these different relationships. We must be rid of gossip, mean-spirited comments, suspicion, criticism, grumbling about others; these are the things that give offence, that become stumbling-blocks; so we must be rid of them. Replace all of that with open-hearted, warm-hearted affection for all of the people of God.

What kind of advert are you for Christian faith? You might not consider yourself a great advert. You don't see yourself as a strong Christian who has answers to of the all questions of life and faith; you don't have life sorted; life has been a bit of a struggle; what have you got to offer? Grace! That is what we have to offer. Grace from the God who has sustained us in life; grace from the God who loves us as we are; grace from the God who knows our weaknesses, who sympathises with us in our weakness, who has shared our weakness on the cross. That is what we have to offer. We may have the trials of life written all across our faces at times, but when we can still say "Jesus loves me!" we have a great witness to offer the world. That was Paul's life: in hardships of all kinds, he endured; in difficulties he proved time and time again that God's grace was enough to support and save him; his life and ministry were not marked by power and 'success' but by the cross and by weakness; yet through him the grace of God in the gospel changed the world. It can do so again!