

## Paul and his ambitions

Sunday 28 June, 2015

*A sermon preached by the Canon Pastor, the Revd Dr Ruth Redpath*

In any environment Paul would have been a leader - intellectually brilliant and articulate, determined and energetic, ambitious, we might even say driven.

He was obviously headed for great things within Judaism - if he had not met the risen Christ in that light which blinded him on the Damascus Road (represented so strikingly in the glass of our West doors). Instead, his gifts and energies were captured by Jesus Christ and, through his Spirit, enhanced and re-directed.

Paul has often received a bad press from Christians - people quote his apparent misogyny, for which there could be at least partial explanations in contemporary cultural and local factors in the contexts he is addressing.

We may struggle with aspects of his theology, at times difficult to follow because presented in the unfamiliar rhetorical debating style in which he would have been groomed as a Pharisee.

To others, his personality is not particularly attractive. He himself hints that some people did not take to him as a person very much, including the possibility they were distracted by a physical disability or disfigurement.

But - on this day particularly - I believe we must put those considerations aside. And passages such as that chosen for the Epistle today from the Colossian letter ( 1: 21 – 29) help us in that, because, there, much is revealed about his calling and his motivation and his deeply-felt compassion for these early believers, as well as his longings for the development of Christian community. There may be something in that for us all.

Paul wrote this letter from prison in response to news of the church in Colossae, news received in a visit from the one who had established it - Epaphras - himself a convert to Jesus Christ through Paul's ministry.

There was much for which Paul and Epaphras could thank God in the life of the fellowship there, but there were some concerns. Precisely what they were is not defined, but it seems that some teachers were suggesting that the faith which Paul proclaimed was incomplete in some way, and that something extra - an additional rite, or a display of some spectacular gift, or a different theological emphasis perhaps - needed to be added to the gospel which they had received.

Earlier in this letter, after the usual greetings, he has bombarded his readers with a mind-stretching hymn of praise to Christ - a hymn which proclaims Christ as Lord of creation, in heaven and in earth, far above all other power and thought. And not just Lord of the created order but Lord also of the Church, his body.

"In Jesus Christ" says Paul "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell". **Nothing** need be added to that gospel which he proclaimed and which they had embraced.

For the Christians in Colossae, mostly of a Gentile background, that gospel had made all the difference in the world. There was a time when they had been excluded, estranged from God, (vv. 21,22) a time when the salvation purposes of God, formerly a mystery (v 26) - that is to say, known only to God, not yet disclosed - had now been **fully** revealed in the coming of his Son. Through the death of Christ, they had been reconciled to God; they could stand confidently in the presence of God because of Christ, without a stain on their conscience.

How could things be made better than that? **Nothing** could be added to that initiative of God.

That was the gospel of which he was the servant (v 23) becoming that servant because commissioned by God (v 25.)

So what, for Paul, did it mean to be “a servant of the gospel”?

There are 2 things which he tells us are dominant in his ministry.

1. The first is expressed in a phrase in v 25 which may be familiar - “**to make the Word of God fully known**” - this is the phrase adopted by our Archbishop a few years ago as the mission statement for our diocese. It appears on the masthead on the website and on letterheads and such places. As we know, in his desire to make that word of God fully known, (and we are not just speaking of a geographical parameter in that word “fully”) he had been indefatigable in his travels, preaching the word of God wherever he went, undeterred by physical difficulties and by opposition. This, on its own, while drawing forth our admiration, could reinforce the view of a relentless, driven person, which, we know, sometimes has the effect of inhibiting friendship and real connection. But he wasn't just a theologian and preacher with daunting missionary zeal. He was a pastor and had a pastor's heart, longing and praying that the word of God would become part of the fabric of, fully embedded in, the life of every Christian and Christian community.

2. So it is that the second desire for his ministry of which he speaks in v 28 is “to present everyone (including the Christians in Colossae) mature in Christ.” Much and all as he preached so passionately the completeness, the total adequacy of the Gospel of Christ to break down the barriers between humans and God, he recognized that peoples' understanding of it and their response to it, in developing Christ-like attitudes and conduct in the life of the church, as in the ordinary affairs of personal life, was not automatic; it needed to grow and mature. They needed to be securely established (v 23); they needed to stand firm, without being diverted by something which sounded more glamorous, which offered something extra. For that to happen called for hard work and commitment from everyone. He therefore sought to warn and to teach (v 28) so that all who had received the good news would see the implications of their faith, for themselves personally and for the community of faith. Thus the beautiful new plant which was the life of Christ within the individual Christian and in the body of Christ as a whole, would develop and flower and produce mature fruit and be able to survive, **even thrive**, whatever distractions were introduced by others and however tough the circumstances. His commitment to this pastoral, teaching, aspect of his ministry was no less than that of his preaching. Indeed, they surely fit together.

More than once, in the book of Acts, we read how, after a time of public ministry in synagogues and market squares, he settles down in that same place, for a year or two, living in the community, earning his keep in the arduous labour of a tent-maker, available to support and teach the new believers. We read of him retracing the steps of hazardous missionary journeys to see how the new Christian groups are getting on, to encourage them in the faith.

The cost to him in fulfilling his calling was huge in terms of suffering and hardship (v 24) and (v 29) in sheer toil (a word used for back-breaking manual work) and struggle (a word from which our “agony” comes). And here he is in prison - still caring for the church.

Rightly, we see St Paul as one of the heroes of our faith.

We can wonder where we might be if he had not encountered the risen Christ, and if his leadership, his theological rigour, his writings had not been available then and now.

- We could put him on a pedestal of the sort that renders his achievements unattainable by anyone else.
- We could say he was a man for his time - and use that as an excuse for not seeking to learn from his faithfulness to his ministry.

- Some people might say that this and like passages in Paul's letters are only for the church leaders. I am sure that all of us who have some leadership here at St Paul's or in ministries elsewhere do indeed take these things seriously.
- Any of us could look at ourselves and say that we are not so gifted.

Perhaps we all need to read the whole letter (which, when received, would have been read out to all the members, not just to the leaders). In the third chapter, he suggests that all the members of the Christian community with their various gifts were expected to take a share in the maturing of each other in the faith. "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly," he says, "teach and admonish one another in all wisdom and with gratitude in your hearts sing..."

Christians need each other to stay on track, to encourage one another, to keep a balanced perspective. That is why worship together is so important; that is why we gather together at the Eucharist to refocus on that fullness of salvation which is ours in Christ's offering of himself to God. That is why we encourage the group Bible study which follows this service. We all contribute to each other's growth into stable, mature Christians whose trust in God is a day-by-day experience, and who contribute to the unity and ministry of the whole body of Christ.

As we conclude, we should ask, how was it that Paul was able to keep going so tirelessly, in spite of all the physical hazards, in spite of the ferocious, personally hurtful opposition of many Jewish compatriots, amidst the disappointments when those he had trusted with the gospel lost their way, and then himself being rendered immobile in prison with the threat of death. He did it, he says in the last verse of our reading - with all the energy that Christ inspires within me.

The life of Christ within through the Holy Spirit, and the example of Christ without, was what motivated and empowered him, and he saw himself as a mere servant of that Christ. So he rejected the development of a celebrity cult following and clever techniques to win a response to Jesus Christ. That was not the style of Jesus nor was it his.

Says one writer of St Paul

"The normal evidence of God at work is his servants at work. Surely it is evidence enough of supernatural power to see the great persecutor going from house to house throwing Christians into prison, now going from house to house building up the people of God. To see such a person at work is to see God at work."

May God help us to follow his example of servant leadership in the church community and wherever we are called to serve.