

Sermon

2Corinthians 6.1-13

So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you, be reconciled to God. (5.20)

This verse from chapter five of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians was the final verse in last week's reading, and it provides the frame, or the context in which the next chapter is written. What is an ambassador? Last week in my sermon, I read out the exhortation from the Ordinal to people entering holy orders about being an ambassador of Christ. It's something that I myself have spent quite a significant amount of time and prayer on. But I also have a real life example of an ambassador in my own family. Last month, Leon and I travelled to Peru on our holidays and one of the reasons we chose this country was that my brother is living there now because his wife Maree is Australia's ambassador there. She is Australia's representative in a country far away. And over the ten days that we were with them, we watched her in action, engaging with local officials, hosting a breakfast one week, and cocktail party the next, also referring us to the Mary McKillop House for families with children with disability living in the outer northern urban area that is home to some desperately poor people. In all my knowledge of Maree, I'd have to say that some of her qualities include an open-minded inquisitive nature, a sense of compassion, and a fairly fierce set of boundaries defined by her ideals of justice. An ambassador is someone who speaks for, or represents something. And since Christ is no longer present in a physical sense, we who are Christians, represent him and speak for him. Paul has been quite clear in the previous two chapters that we are to embody Christ and bring the message of God's reconciliation to all people. And he continues on this theme in chapter 6. Let's have a look.

Well, we know we're in for some hard-hitting stuff when we read the first verse of this chapter which says "As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain." Paul is urging the Corinthians, and indeed us, that as we work with God in this ministry of reconciliation, not to accept the grace of God in vain. I wonder what it is that Paul is warning us about here?

Perhaps we need to consider what is God's grace. Paul has just been talking about the God who is reconciled to us through Jesus Christ; this free (for us) gift of reconciliation, this forgiveness of our sin through Jesus' death on the cross. Paul says "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation". So how is it that we might take this gift in vain? Well perhaps we are not demonstrating the power of God's transforming grace, perhaps we are not living out our love for each other, God's creations. And Paul is quite clear that now is the time. He even uses a quote from the prophet Isaiah to emphasise this point.

'At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.'

Paul says "now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation." In Christ, we are God's new creation, this is our salvation. We live in the world today and our actions now should reflect God's gracious act in our lives.

But it's difficult, isn't it? We all face our challenges and being the loving gracious person that God would have us be is sometimes really hard. When I just reflect on my own behaviour on occasions, I am not always loving or gracious. I can be demanding, impatient and critical. But with repentance, and with a heart of humility, God continues to forgive my unworthiness, and I continue to strive for the kingdom, in God's strength and through God's will.

But it's not always easy is it? Look at that list that Paul gives us reflecting his own challenges in ministry: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger. Clearly challenges and difficult times are part of ministry and part of life and it's quite possible that each one of these challenges has been experienced by someone in this room. I myself am quite familiar with sleepless nights, various afflictions and hardships, and periods that have required great endurance.

And this is the beauty of scripture. At one level this letter can be read as Paul's writing to a specific community whom he is both chastising and encouraging. And perhaps we can say, "oh but that's not us!" But scripture is always to be read and prayed over in terms of how it does apply to us. Paul says "as servants of God, we have commended ourselves in every way". He's reflecting on his own experience here, but it begs the question how do we as servants of God, commend ourselves? And Paul provides us with one of his lists, so common across his letters, a list of spiritual gifts for ministry when he writes:

"by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left."

So how do we commend ourselves as servants of God? Paul describes how the Holy Spirit creates within us purity, knowledge, patience, and kindness. Then, he places at the center of the list the One who works in and through our suffering: the Holy Spirit. Finally, with three short phrases he writes what the Holy Spirit enacts in us through our public vocation as God's servants: genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God.

Can you see the Holy Spirit moving in your life? Can you feel the Holy Spirit pouring these gifts into you? Do people know you as a person with these

gifts? I have to say that in my experience, the gift of truthful speech can be a double edged sword and perhaps there needs to be an element of wisdom and kindness when delivering the truth in certain circumstances. I wonder what it would be like to have a whole congregation of Spirit filled people, sent out into our communities of Lara and Little River to act out our love for God and for God's creation?

As well as being the passionate, Spirit led Apostle, filled with missionary zeal, travelling across Greece and Turkey, bringing people to Jesus, Paul is also such a realist when he says:

“in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

Isn't this the truth about our own lives and the interactions with even our families and friends? How do we live out this experience of the work of the Spirit amidst our suffering or experience in everyday life? Paul answers in paradoxes.

First, he deals with how we might appear to others. We may be honoured or shamed, with either good or bad reputations. Yet throughout it all, we remain true, even when treated as impostors. We can be confident that we will be seen for who we are, even though we may often feel others do not fully recognize the Gospel message that we bring.

Second, he deals with what actually takes place in these experiences. When we seek God's reconciliation and forgiveness with one another, in our often messy and complicated relationships, we participate in Christ's sufferings for the world. In the process, we may indeed have to die—not our final death, but the daily dying that fleshes out our baptism into Christ—

yet in Christ we live, we are renewed daily. We may even be disciplined through what is taking place in our lives, yet in Christ we are not destroyed but recreated.

Last, Paul lists public activities that embody the work of reconciliation. As members of Christ's body, we undergo the "pain" of speaking truth to one another about difficulties in our relationships, even as we "rejoice" together when we forgive and are reconciled with one another.

In spite of our apparent "poverty," we can make others "rich" following the example of our Lord. The service and word of reconciliation cannot be divorced from seeking a "fair balance"—both material and spiritual—among the wealthy and poor. And it's interesting that in this, Paul is reflecting on how when he was with the Corinthians for 18 months, he did not ask for any material benefit for his apostolic work but channelled these resources into building up the church there.

Finally, in spite of "having nothing"—since in Christ we are no longer defined by the wealth, norms and power of this age—we are those who "possess everything"—as he says in his earlier letter to the Corinthians in verse 21 of chapter 3: All things are yours in Christ.

It's compelling writing isn't it? I wonder what we can do as individuals and as a community to demonstrate being ambassadors or servants of the Lord? Perhaps a good starting point is to take Paul literally in his last instruction in our reading today and "open wide our hearts".

Let us pray. Loving and gracious God, we give you thanks for the Apostle Paul and his words of wisdom and encouragement today. We pray that we can walk as servants of the Lord and open wide our hearts to our communities here in Lara and Little River. Give us the courage and desire to spread the knowledge of your love. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.