**Sharing in Christ’s triumph** 26/9/21 dkm

Read: Exodus 29:38-30:10, 2Corinthians 2

Text: 2Corinthians 2:14-17

Psalms: 146, 46c:1-8, 141:1-5, 72old

Being in lockdown because of coronavirus has been difficult for school children, and for us not being able to physically gather for worship. But it has been a good time for extra reading and the occasional TV show. I watched a show called ‘Mr Jones’ which told the background of George Orwell’s famous allegory about communism called ‘Animal farm’. I also watched a documentary on the life of Julius Caesar and other Roman emperors, extending my knowledge of the Romans in Europe beyond what I learnt from Shakespeare’s plays, and Asterix and Obelix comics!

Caesar was the first emperor of Rome; it was previously a republic ruled by a senate. He was a general who led an army in conquering the barbarians in Gaul and into Britain. He returned to Rome in such triumph that he was able to assume power as the first dictator or emperor of the empire. This documentary portrayed other would -be emperors leading an army into battle for the purpose of returning to Rome in a victory procession. With overwhelming popular support they were able to claim the seat of emperor. The Titus Arch in Rome depicts the victory procession of Emperor Vespasian and his son Titus after they destroyed Jerusalem in AD70.

The apostle Paul had not been to Rome when he wrote this letter to the Corinthians but he knew of the Roman victory procession. He knew how the general rode his horse ahead of his soldiers, with captives being led along at the end of this procession into Rome. As pagans, these Romans made sacrifices to their gods as part of victory celebrations. They also had priests burning sweet smelling spices along the way. It was a grand occasion. Paul uses this picture in the passage before us, and also in Colossians 2:15.

We are only in the second chapter of this letter but have come to a major change of direction, what most call a digression, and what some call an insertion from another letter by an editor. Paul has been writing about his change of travel plan because some at Corinth were criticising him for this. He tells of a restless spirit while in Troas because Titus had not returned from Corinth, and of moving over to Macedonia to look for him (2:13). Paul picks up on this theme again in chapter 7 to tell of his relief when Titus finally came (7:6).

This digression begins, ‘Now thanks be to God’ (2:14). He is suddenly overtaken by gratitude towards God, probably from seeing Titus. Titus brought good news and bad news from Corinth. The good news related to the decision of the majority to discipline the immoral man (2:6), and the bad news related to newcomers teaching heresy in their church. So, although we call it a digression, the theme of these four chapters fits with the main tenor of the letter; it is ‘an immensely rich outpouring of triumphant faith in praise of the unfailing adequacy of the grace of God for every conceivable situation, no matter how threatening and destructive it may seem to be’. In this passage we will note firstly, ‘Triumph in Christ’ secondly, ‘Fragrance of Christ’ and thirdly, ‘Speak in Christ’.

**1. Triumph in Christ**

When Paul cries out with thankfulness to God, he does so with sincerity and exuberance. He is so overcome with thankfulness that he breaks into metaphorical language without specifying the reason for his thankfulness, although we have suggested it related to reunion with his fellow worker Titus. In looking to God with deep thankfulness, he pictures God as ‘leading us in triumph in Christ’ (2:14). This was not the first time he had cause to adopt this picture in giving thanks and praise to God because He ‘always’ leads us in triumph in Christ. We noted his use of this picture in relation to Christ’s victory over the ‘principalities and powers’ opposed to him; legalism being one of these principles (Col 2:15). These opponents of Christ are pictured as captives being paraded by a victorious Roman general.

Some commentators think that being ‘led in triumph in Christ’ means being made a public spectacle for the sake of the gospel. Paul was no stranger to ridicule and suffering for preaching the gospel, but is this really what he feels triumphant about as his writes this verse about God leading us in triumph in Christ? Is it not more of a reference to the victory of Christ on the cross and in his resurrection, the victory he refers to in 1Corinthians 15:57? God is the general who has conquered and Paul is one of his soldiers. Calvin writes, ‘Paul means that he had a share in the triumph that God was celebrating’.

It was Jesus who said, ‘I will build my church, and gates of Hades shall not prevail against it’ (Matt 16:18). Paul ministered with this confidence, confidence in the words of Christ, not in his own words or own strength. In this way he was different to those peddling God’s word, as referred to in verse 17. The church cannot be likened to a football team depending on its own strength to bring them victory, or to a business out to get the most clients and the greatest profit. Too often churches and Christian ministers operate on this basis- the biggest and the best. In the Middle Ages it was magnificent cathedrals that signalled greatness. In the last century we have seen glass cathedrals and mega churches as pictures of triumphant Christianity.

The triumph of God that Paul reflected upon was not about bigness in buildings or number. It was about God’s strength being made perfect in weakness (12:10). God was triumphant in Christ, in the cross and the empty tomb. He is pleased with faithful and sacrificial servants spreading the message of the gospel. Paul was such a follower, a servant who could say, ‘Imitate me, even as I imitate Christ’ (1Cor 11:1).

**2. Fragrance of Christ**

The documentary I saw did not refer to the burning of incense during the victory procession but this was apparently the practice. They had trumpets playing also. The procession was designed to stimulate all the senses. Continuing with the metaphor, the apostle Paul refers to the fragrance or aroma of the knowledge of God in every place, ‘the fragrance of Christ’ (2:14, 15). Any converted Jew like himself, would have smelt the incense that was burned on the altar of incense in the temple, constructed according to the pattern given to Moses on the mountain. That incense would have covered the smell of the burnt offerings being made in the temple. It probably served the same purpose in the Roman victory procession where the smell of burning flesh may have been that of prisoners being killed in the arena.

When I was in Kenya teaching in a Bible college I attended a funeral every Saturday; they conducted all their funerals on Saturday. I went to the village to find the coffin at the front of the house and the people gathered around. The person must have died on the Monday because there was a smell coming from the coffin, even though a man was spraying perfume around it. Remember Lazarus who had been in the tomb four days: ‘Lord by this time there will be a stench’ they said to Jesus (John 11:39).

What about the tomb of Jesus? Mary and other women went to his tomb as soon as possible after the Sabbath to anoint the dead body of Jesus with spices and fragrant oils, but when they got there the tomb was empty. Their fragrances were not needed because Jesus was no longer dead; the angel told them, ‘He is risen’. As Mary stood outside the tomb weeping Jesus appeared and spoke to her. We do not read of her trying to wrap his body in the fragrances she had brought, because he was no longer dead but alive!

Paul pictures the risen Jesus as the fragrance of divine knowledge being spread in every place ‘through us’, through preachers like Paul (2:14). This fragrance of the gospel is spread into every place by the preaching of the word, the preaching of Christ crucified and risen from the dead. This was the calling Paul received from God, the calling to spread the fragrance of Christ in all the world. God wants all people to smell this fragrance, not just those who are being saved (2:15). He wants us to be like the baker sending out the smell of fresh bread into the street. I have been told that bakers actually pipe the smell from their ovens into the street to attract customers. God wants you to be like the baker spreading the fragrance of Christ into the world through everything you say and do. This world of death and decay certainly needs the sweet smell of the gospel.

Tragically, the gospel will not smell sweet to everyone. To some it will be ‘the aroma/smell of death leading to death’ (2:16). The gospel is often spoken of in terms of light banishing the darkness, but as Jesus said, some love the darkness (John 3:19, 20). So it is that some love the stench of death; these are those who are perishing. Light is very pervasive, and so is the fragrance of Christ, the sweet smell of life in Christ.

Outside the tomb of Jesus on the first day of the week, Mary was smelling the resurrection life, not the stench of death that she expected. Not long afterward, Pharisees and Roman rulers came to the same tomb hoping to smell death, and in a sense they continued to smell death as they searched desperately for the dead body of the One they crucified. Only the smell of death would make them happy.

Sadly, there are still people today who love the smell of death. They desperately want to smell the death of the one who is the fragrance of knowledge and love sent by God into this world. To the one Jesus is the fragrance of life, to the other the stench of death. You have heard the gospel, so what will it be for you- life or death? And if you have smelled the fragrance of Christ, are you diffusing this fragrance among those you love as family or neighbours?

**3. Speak in Christ**

The apostle goes on to ask, ‘Who is sufficient for these things?’ (2:16)- who indeed! Paul then says, ‘for we are not’, but the answer to this question comes in verse 5 of the next chapter: ‘Our sufficiency is from God, who has made us ministers of the new covenant’. Paul was not sufficient, and we are not sufficient in and of ourselves, but God has made us sufficient. What a tremendous promise! ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me’ (Phil 4:13). Are you ‘testing’ Christ to see how much he will strengthen you? Are you allowing His fullness to dwell in you, such that you spread the fragrance of life in this dead and decaying world? As Barnett writes, ‘The message incarnated in the messenger is a fragrance of life to those who obey it, but to others it has the odour of death’.

Paul was a sincere and faithful preacher of the word of God. He preached with care, care that he spoke to truth as given him by the Lord, and with prayer, prayer that the message would be received and believed. But the newcomers in the church at Corinth were neither careful nor prayerful in their preaching. They were ‘peddling the word of God’ as Paul says (2:17). These men, these false teachers, might be eloquent and persuasive but they were also insincere, arrogant and self-sufficient- in contrast to Paul’s sufficiency which was from God. Their interest in the gospel was what they could get out of it as peddlers or sellers of cheap, adulterated merchandise- in contrast to Paul who asked for no money from the Corinthians.

Too many are hearing a watered-down version of the gospel in our day. Preachers are asking for less than the gospel demands; namely recognition of sin and repentance from it- remember the man living an immoral life in Corinth. Preachers are promising what the gospel does not promise, namely health, wealth, and happiness in this fallen world. Do be careful and discerning when hearing, or when preaching the gospel, which is ‘the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes’ (Rom 1:16). Speak and listen in the sight of God in Christ.