**Messenger must match the message** 23/1/22 dkm

Read: 1Samuel 17:38-47, 2Corinthians 6

Text: 2Corinthians 6:3-10

Psalms: 7:10-17, 118:10-18, 10:12-18,72old

Do we believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes? Do we as a church believe we have a message that the world must hear? Do we know this message and are we demonstrating this message in the way we live? When we look around at empty seats, we must ask ourselves these questions.

Liberal theology has greatly undermined the message of the church today, not to mention other departures from the true gospel. The behaviour of church leaders has also undermined the gospel message. The Church of Rome, and some protestant churches, have been scandalized by paedophile priests in recent decades. Some Anglican dioses are selling church buildings in order to pay compensation claims. The sexual immorality of a popular preacher and author was revealed after his recent death. What do people think as they read his books on the gospel- if they are still reading them!

The apostle Paul believed in the power of God to save people, and he preached the gospel to that end. He also knew that his hearers would question the truth of his claims by the sincerity with which he not only preached but also lived the gospel. He was not a ‘do as I say not as I do’ teacher, any more than Jesus was. Even so, I do not like being called a ‘religious’ person because religions are man-made. People take on religious beliefs but they have no power to change their behaviour; they do not become a ‘new creation’ as Paul explains in 2Corinthians 5:17. Sadly, some who call themselves Christians do not know about being a new creation in Christ Jesus either. For this reason we use the term ‘Christian’ carefully because for many it is a religious term, having no reference to the power of God unto salvation.

‘If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation’ writes the apostle (5:17). He wrote this in the context of false teachers having infiltrated the church at Corinth- not unlike liberal theologians and paedophiles infiltrating the church in our day. The false teachers exploited divisions that had come into the church. They joined the party that was undermining the gospel preached by Paul, and attacking the apostle himself. Paul was hurt by their personal attacks but was not seeking revenge. Nevertheless, his message was so closely connected to his conduct he was compelled to defend his conduct, as well as the gospel itself.

Paul was writing to the church, especially to those who believed the gospel he preached and who were now confused by the attacks aimed at Paul: ‘That you may have an answer to those who boast in appearance and not in heart’ (5:12). In these verses he writes to commend himself and his colleagues as ministers or servants of God- and that not for the first or last time (4:8-12, 11:22-31, 12:10). He wanted to ‘take the wind out of the sails’ of his opponents by refuting their accusations of deceitful and unworthy conduct. He wanted to make sure that his ministry was in no way a stumbling block to these new and immature believers. So Paul outlines what he had endured as a servant of God in terms of trials in general, and in specific. He goes on to speak of the positive aspects of his life, our second subheading, and the various paradoxes that characterise life in this world for a servant of God.

**1. Patience in abundance**

In commending himself to the church at Corinth, Paul asks them to consider the great patience or endurance he was demonstrating. He had suffered, and was continuing to suffer, for the sake of the gospel, and for their sakes as he ministered to them from a distance. In the early days they appreciated Paul and his ministry among them; they believed in Jesus and worshipped the Lord as he taught them. What had changed? Sexual immorality was being tolerated and even praised by some as a gospel freedom! Personalities and politics brought divisions in the church, and then false teachers came with letters of commendation, with eloquence, and with another gospel.

Paul writes firstly of general troubles, hardships and distress that he faced when he first came to Corinth. He came alone and worked to support himself. He was thrown out of the synagogue but continued preaching in the house next door. He experienced the same opposition from the Jews wherever he went. Paul was arrested and judged in a Gentile court. What minister of the gospel or servant of God today would endure such hardships and opposition?

Paul goes on to mention specific afflictions he suffered, in another trilogy of words: ‘in beatings, imprisonments, and riots’ (6:5 ESV). In chapter 11 he gives more detail of what he suffered at the hands of men, while in the Book of Acts Luke also tells of Paul being stoned and beaten and imprisoned at various places. He was not found guilty of any wrongdoing but suffered as a criminal. Paul was aware that his saviour and Lord did no wrong but suffered and died at the hands of men. If we acknowledge the suffering of our sinless saviour in this world, why should we be surprised when we suffer as followers of Jesus (John 15:18). In fact, if we are not suffering as believers, should we not be asking ourselves, why not? ‘If we are treated as totally irrelevant, are we really acting as salt and light as Christ intended we should (Mat 5:13,14)?’ writes Grogan.

As far as troubles and hardships are concerned, some of these were self-imposed for the sake of the ministry. Paul write of labours, sleepless nights, and hunger (6:5). We spoke of Paul supporting himself by making tents; he probably did this during the night if he was preaching in the day. Labours or hard work probably refer to physical work, but preaching the gospel is also labour. Speaking in public is physically taxing, not to mention the necessary preparation. Paul’s ministry also involved a lot of travel which was arduous and dangerous in those days, and even in our recent past.

My childhood minister would travel by horseback to three different centres each Lord’s day- so I am told. Yet I recently heard of a church which gives their pastor a day of preaching each month. In large churches the pastor may only preach once a month. What does Paul’s ‘labours, sleepless nights and hunger’ mean to us today? I recall a fellow servant of the Lord spreading newspaper on the dirty floor of a crowded Indian train as we travelled overnight to an evangelistic camp in Bihar. Maybe more hardships in training and the early years of ministry would make for more effective ministers of the gospel, for men who look out for the interests of Christ rather than their own interests.

**2. Positive aspects of conduct**

The endurance spoken of by the apostle is not one of stoic, stiff-upper-lip patience; it was certainly not a cause for complaint. He rejoiced that he was counted worthy to suffer affliction for the gospel (cf. Acts 5:41). When we preach the truth of the gospel, there will always be those who are critical. We should be concerned if our preaching does not ‘ruffle any feathers’ as they say. The word preached is aimed at hearts, at sinful hearts. By the power of God such hearts will be touched and changed, or by the power of Satan such hearts will rebel and get angry with the preacher, and with God.

Paul ministered ‘by purity’ (6:6), meaning he watched his own life, seeking to live in holiness and with total commitment to the Lord. God is holy and we must be holy; being holy we will obey his commands, especially his so-called love commands. We cannot go around saying we love God but hate people. It is impossible to preach the love of God while hating our hearers. Paul speaks of ‘sincere love’ and ‘kindness’; both are fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22), fruits seen in our relationships with other people. Longsuffering or patience is another fruit of the Spirit. We must demonstrate great patience in our ministry. This does not mean overlooking immoral behaviour of course, or backsliding. Through a council of elders, the minister must exercise loving discipline.

There are different views as to what Paul means by ‘knowledge’ here in verse 6. Some think it is knowledge of the truth and others knowledge of his hearers; he needs to understand both. In our ministry we must be faithful to God’s word, and faithful to the people; this is my prayer every time I preach. Ministers are not policemen merely administering the law; they are teachers, wanting to see believers growing up into Christ who is the head (Eph 4:14, 15).

In writing to the Thessalonians, Paul spoke of ‘affectionately longing for you’, noting that he was ‘well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become so dear to us’ (1Thess 2:8). The Lord brought this verse to my mind when, as a missionary, I started hating Indians after being robbed on a train journey. It was my first, but not my last, encounter with thieves and pickpockets.

While his opponents relied on their own abilities and eloquence in their ‘ministry’, Paul relied on the power of God. He would not resort to deceptive or corrupt ways, even though accused of doing so (7:2). He always spoke the truth in love (Eph 4:15). It is interesting how often politicians are caught out for things they say ‘off-camera’. Servants of God are never ‘off-camera’- God sees and hears us all the time!

Paul often likens the Christian life to that of a soldier. In Ephesians 6 he writes about the armour of God. In speaking of the power of God in ministry, he refers to ‘the armour of righteousness on the right hand and the left’ (6:7). Is he referring to the shield of faith or the sword of the Spirit (Eph 6:16, 17)? We must be ready to defend ourselves, as well as move forward at any time, because Satan attacks us in any way at any time. Maintaining truth and righteousness, as well as prayer, is key to resisting the devil.

**3. Paradoxes in ministry**

Paul goes from listing the troubles and persecutions and hardships he faced, to listing the positive aspects of his life and ministry and his source of power in God. In the closing verses he lists a series of paradoxes that mark the life of a servant of God. Let us never forget that, while the gospel is good news, it is not always seen as such by sinners, and certainly not by Satan. While, tragically, there are paedophile priests, we might wonder what our society would say about Jesus who said, ‘Let the little children come to me’. Our society is so focussed on sexual love, it is blind to the love spoken of by Jesus.

While we need to understand our society and exercise care, we will always face accusations of deceit and dishonesty. Christians in India are accused such behaviour whenever a Hindu is converted because people cannot comprehend the power of God. While rejoicing in the power of God to bring life to dead hearts, pastors are brought before the courts, accused of manipulating people to convert. Paul writes of honour and dishonour, of evil report and good report, of being accused of deception yet being absolutely honest (6:8). Again, Paul would remember how Jesus our Lord was accused of breaking the law, even as he healed people and raised the dead- the laws of men not the laws of God.

Paul’s opponents at Corinth were saying, ‘Who is this fellow?’ even though he had lived in their community for one and a half years. The world loves to accuse non-conformists of being nobodies. You may be an honest hard worker, as I hope you are, but you may be sidelined or ostracised as being ‘religious’ by fellows workers. Paul knew all about being sidelined and falsely accused. Indeed, he speaks of dying yet being alive as a minster of the gospel. Years ago preachers were respected in our society, but no more. Does this matter? Where the gospel is advancing preachers get no respect from their society. They are beaten and thrown into prison and killed, but the church grows and God is glorified. ‘Ministers of God can never be proud or self-serving’.

Paul would have sung in the Psalms of David about enemies setting traps for him and attacking him, but in almost all the psalms David ends by praising God. He recalled the mighty works of God in delivering the righteous. Paul remembered the cross of Christ. He knew what it to be poor and needy, and what it was to be sorrowful, to be beaten but not killed, but he also knew the power of God to save and to bless. He rejoiced in the Lord always. After all, our Lord and saviour was rich but became poor and died for our sake. He died but rose again, the greatest paradox of all. Do you, as a child of God, lack any good thing? What more can you want than Christ himself! Because he lives you also live; you live to glorify God and enjoy him forever!