

Recently on the front page of the Sunday Times and in a large article inside Sir Ian Botham was making known his support to leave the European Union. Really??

Without reading the articles I wondered on what basis and what authority he was speaking and how he had managed to get such prominent space in a major newspaper.

The question in my mind was why should I listen to his views on this topic any more than anyone else's? Why should I feel he has something authoritative to say?

What we have been seeing as we look at the letter to the Colossians are the words of Paul and we may well ask why should we do that? Why should we feel he has something authoritative to say? Here were these Christians gathered in the front room of Philemon's house in Colossae listening as Tychicus read the letter from Paul to them. Already he has thanked God for their faith through the gospel (v6) which Epaphras had brought to them (v7). He was praying for them that, having been rescued by God (v13) they might (v10) live a life worthy of the God who had qualified them (v12) to be part of his kingdom. That kingdom he has reminded them (v15-18) is where Jesus, who is fully God (v19), reigns and into which they who were cut off from God (v21) have been brought back through the death of Jesus (v22) and in which they have the certainty of being accepted in heaven (v22) if, (v23) they continue in their faith which has come through the gospel.

This has been the amazing effect of the gospel of which v23 Paul had become a servant.

Great so far but it may well have been that some at Colossae were thinking "really"?

Why should they listen to Paul? Here was a man who was not there, had never been there and was now in prison. Hardly a great CV! In the meantime as we see in 2:4 there were people who were there and who were pretty eloquent why not listen to them?

So what we have in this passage is, I think Paul defending his authority and the gospel he preaches and in so doing giving us an example of true Christian ministry.

1. He served the church as Jesus did v24

What a weird way to start his CV by saying "I rejoice in what was suffered for you". The world is about winners and suffering is to do with losing. It was likely that these Christians knew about Paul's sufferings and that he was in prison as he wrote to them. Paul does play that down? Not at all. Yes he had suffered and he had suffered for them perhaps not personally but for the gospel which had reached them and note he was happy to have done it.

He was happy to have served them with the gospel no matter what the cost to himself. Happy because the way of serving and suffering was the way of Jesus who said "even the son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Paul was following that path of service and suffering and happy to do so because it was the way of Jesus. The gospel and its ministry involves suffering.

More than that Paul said “I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions”. What did he mean by that? It might refer to the fact that Jesus suffers with and in his people. Paul knew that because at his conversion point on the Damascus road Jesus asked him “why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4). But more likely in this context as Paul is seeking to defend his authority is he saying that in continuing Jesus’ ministry, in sharing the gospel, Paul also suffers physically as Jesus suffered. His suffering rather than suggesting he was not good at his job is a mark of the faithful servant and minister of Jesus. Gospel ministry will involve suffering and sometimes extreme suffering.

John Paton was a Christian missionary. In 1858 he and his young pregnant wife went to the primitive Island of Tanna in the New Hebrides. During the first year she died of fever. This was followed seventeen days later by the death of their one-month-old son. Grief-stricken, John Paton buried his wife and child. He recorded these words:

“It was very difficult to be resigned, left alone, and in sorrowful circumstances; but feeling immovably assured that my God and Father was too wise and loving to err in anything that He does or permits, I looked up to the Lord for help, and struggled on in His work. I do not pretend to see through the mystery of such visitations - wherein God calls away the young, the promising, and those sorely needed for His service here; but this I do know and feel, that, in the light of such dispensations, it becomes us all to love and serve our blessed Lord Jesus so that we may be ready at His call for death and Eternity.”

Such suffering as Paul went through and John Paton and others down the years have gone through may not be the norm but what Paul was saying here is that as it was for Jesus so it will be for his followers.

Friends is this not so? Yes it is sharing the gospel involves service and suffering. A couple of weeks ago Rosie Foster was sharing with us her experiences at University and spoke of how they encouraged people to text in a question and they got the answer with a toastie delivered to them. That is service. But we know sharing the gospel even with friends can be hard and can cause pain. Paul like Jesus knew that pain but was happy to serve and rather than suffering being a sign of failure in gospel ministry it can be a sign of closeness to Jesus.

2. He was a servant with true authority v25a

He was a servant of the gospel “by the commission of God gave me”. Here are his credentials for those Christians and for us to peruse. As he said in v1 he is “an apostle by the will of God”. As we saw in our first sermon of the series what he meant was that he was Christ’s representative. That

meant he was not speaking about but on behalf of Jesus. You can't really argue with that. When Paul speaks we hear Jesus speaking.

Yet I have often heard people refer to sections from the letters and say in effect "it is only Paul" and even worse as people denigrate Paul and dismiss his teaching. These Christians in Colossae may well have been listening to other teachers who with their comfortable lifestyles and their polished phrases sounded good but, Paul points out, it is he who by God's call and commission is the apostle. He spoke with the authority of Jesus and their and our response to Paul will reflect something of our attitude to Jesus. We ought to be a thrilled to hear from Paul as we would be from Jesus. This is what set Paul apart from others whom the Colossian Christians might hear and anyone we might hear. It is great to hear good preaching but Paul is different he is by the commission of God an apostle. When he speaks Jesus speaks and they and we should listen.

3. He was a servant with a true message v25b-27

Not only was he commissioned by God but the message he has was given to him by God. He was called "to present to you the word of God in its fullness".

He then goes on to describe the message in this way, v26, "the mystery that was kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints."

So if this message Paul had was a mystery hidden for centuries how come Paul had it? How did Paul get it?

This is what Paul said to the church in Galatia "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ." (Gal 1:11&12). They and we can have confidence in this servant of the gospel because his commission came from God and they and we can have confidence in what he preaches for this has come directly from God. The underlying question is can any of those other teachers in Colossae claim the same?

What was that mystery that God had revealed to Paul? It is God's will to bring Gentiles into his kingdom. This was what God revealed to the Apostle Paul and what Paul, as a servant of the gospel faithfully taught. It was this which in great part was the cause of his suffering because many could not see, could not accept that this could be true and they fought against Paul to stop it becoming true.

Perhaps even the Christians there in Colossae were wondering "can this be true? Can we really be God's children?"

What God had revealed to Paul and what had been passed on from him to them by Epaphras was that yes they could be God's children.

Yes it was true that they had been “alienated from God” as it says in v21. They were totally and utterly separated from God “because of your evil behaviour”. They had been dead to God and without hope of God’s love and presence in this life and the next. But through the gospel “the word of truth” v5 all that had changed and they, yes even these gentile men and women in Colossae, were now, through Jesus’ death, reconciled to God “but now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body to present you holy in his sight” (1.22). That was the mystery Jesus had revealed to Paul and which he, at cost to himself, had passed on to them and through them to us today.

The message summed up in those words “Christ in you the hope of glory”.

This is the heart of the gospel message that we, who through our sin are totally separated from God, have now been brought back to him through the death of Jesus on the cross. Through that we become God’s children we have Christ in us and through this we have the hope of glory. They and we have this certainty that one day we will be with Christ in heaven. This friends is “word of God in all its fullness” (v25). There are no truths outside of Christ and therefore no essential insights hidden. Everything about and for faith is clear for everyone. There are no mysteries and no secrets. Paul proclaimed the whole word of God and so must we.

Through that proclamation these Christians and we are brought into the Kingdom of God. Christ in you the hope of glory. This was what Christ had done for these Christians through the gospel. As one writer puts it, “the greatest gift of Christ in the present is hope for the future”.

In what Paul is saying here we see the nature of this servant of the gospel. He had not chosen his task. He had not imagined his message and he had not concealed anything from anyone.

4. He was a servant with a clear purpose v28-29

So Paul knew his calling and had received the message and as we see in v28 he proclaimed that message. He was faithful to God in fulfilling the service he had been called to. It was by no means easy. We have already spoken about the suffering involved and here in v29 he uses the word labour and struggling and we get the sense of the great efforts involved in taking the gospel through Asia and into Europe.

Why did he continue? Why, given the suffering, did he remain faithful to the call he had received and the message he had been given? “So that we may present everyone perfect in Christ” (v28). He had a clear goal in all his labours and that was that, as he sought “to present the word of God in all its fullness” (v25), his aim was to see “everyone” “perfect” or mature in Christ. His goal was to see people come to faith and then to grow in that faith continuing in it right through to the end. That was what he had prayed for them and that was what he laboured for on their behalf. This is the goal of the gospel not that we become children of God but that we continue as God’s children right through to the end of our lives. Last Sunday was the London marathon and before it many people

were speaking of their hope of finishing the race because it is not the starting but the finishing that is the true goal. In the Christian race we rejoice when people come to faith and begin the race but we long and pray to see ourselves and others continue in that race to the end “Christ in you the hope of glory”.

This was what Paul poured all his efforts into as he worked and prayed on the behalf of others. That is the work of a servant to labour on behalf of others.

Paul revealed to these Christians in Colossae and to us the true servant of the gospel. None of us can be like him in that he was an apostle. Yet there are lessons here for those who would seek to teach the gospel and for churches as they listen to others teach the gospel.

Those who teach should be prepared to suffer and those who listen should not judge their teachers by human and worldly standards. It is not an X factor contest.

Those who teach should know they have been called by God and teach only the word of God and the whole word of God in which nothing is hidden. Those who listen should want to hear only the word of God and not human words and human wisdom. Friends we who listen should be much more critical of what we hear and check it against Scripture and not be happy if we are not being taught “the word of God in all its fullness”. Paul was an Apostle but we who teach today are not so listen carefully but critically.

Those who teach should have the goal clear before them of wanting, as Paul puts it in Col 2:7, to see people “rooted and built up in him”. Their teaching and their labours should be all for others to help people to faith in the first place and then to continue and grow in that faith. Those who listen should wish to be continuing and growing in the faith and looking to be fed through the word of God as it is taught them.

This is the true Christian ministry that Paul performed and sets as an example for us today.