

Circumstances can affect the way we view things. For instance over the 11 years I have been here I must have walked through those doors on a Sunday morning more than 500 times but this morning well it did seem quite different.

Similarly I have preached on these verses a number of times but as I have prepared for this morning well you will excuse me if I have seen them in a personal and slightly different light. However I hope you will not excuse me if what I say is not true to the text of these verses.

The Apostle Paul was writing to the Christian church in Corinth. He'd had a difficult relationship with them because after he had been there and established the church other teachers had come in with a different message and as a result many were questioning Paul, his authority and his message. Much of this letter which we know of as 2 Corinthians is a defence of his ministry.

Here in these verses he speaks very clearly of that ministry and much of it is deeply personal.

He was an apostle and as such unique and yet I think that this has something to say to people like me whom God has called to lead churches. Indeed it has shaped much of my ministry. However, it also speaks to Christians who are not leaders of churches and also to those of us who would not describe ourselves as followers of Jesus.

So friends stay with me as I go through this passage and let's all listen to what God has to say to us. What's your job? Could you condense it into one sentence? Paul does in v11 "we try to persuade men" as in people. His job was to persuade people to follow Jesus.

I remember the story an Australian Vicar told of when he was driving and picked up a hitch hiker. As the conversation went on the hitch hiker asked him what he did. His reply was "the Church of Australia pays me to persuade people to become Christians." That was how Paul saw his role and the rest of the passage helps us to see why and also what he tried to persuade them.

1. Why Paul sought to persuade people v11-20a

I follow football, though some might say Kettering Town is hardly football, but I am intrigued by someone like Arsene Wenger the manager of Arsenal. He has been the manager there for over 20 years and he is even older than me. This season especially he has had a lot of opposition from Arsenal supporters because they are not getting the results they want. I wonder why he does it. He could retire but he seems to carry on why? Why with all this flack does he carry on?

As we look at Paul we might ask the same. As I have said he was getting some grief in Corinth and questions were being asked about his role and his message. But more as we read in Chapter 6 "as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; 5in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger". I look at that and think 'blow that for a game of soldiers'. Why on earth did Paul carry on?

I think this is relevant to anyone here this morning or those listening on download who are Christians because in different ways this is our task to help people come to faith in Jesus. So why, facing such opposition, did Paul continue this task and why should we?

Very quickly to touch on four things he gives as his motivation in these verses.

a. the fear of the Lord v11. Paul knew God and he knew that God is God who holds our eternal destiny in his hands. He is our creator and our judge, as we see in v10 “for we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ”. Paul was in awe of God and he wanted to prepare people for the day when they would come before God. That was part of his motivation.

b. the love of Christ v14. “Christ’s love compels us”. The “us” is not a royal we because he wrote this letter with Timothy but it also includes any who follow Jesus. What he was saying was I want people to know Jesus because of the love Jesus has for us. That love compels me to tell others about him. Isn’t that how it works? We will freely talk of those we love and who love us. Some of you may have heard that I have five grandchildren.... I talk about them because I love them and they mean something to me. Paul was saying the love of God that is shown to me in Jesus compels me, it leaves me no option, it forces me to tell others about him. He knew that Christ’s love was unique as we see in v14 “because we are convinced that one died for all”. It was the sacrificial nature of Christ’s love, the fact that he died in place of each of us an act of sacrificial love, which Paul wanted people to know about. Despite all the flack he got, his knowledge of that unique love compelled him to seek to persuade others. If you are a follower of Christ how does that sit with you? Does the love Christ has shown you compel you to tell others?

c. the effect of faith in Jesus v17. “Therefore if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation”. What did he mean by that? Simply that when we become Christians it is as if our old life of sin and rebellion against God is wiped away and we have a fresh start, a new life with God and in a relationship with him as his children.

I can still remember at school having a slate and a piece of chalk. So you would do the sums, the teacher would check them and mark them wrong as usual and then the slate would be wiped clean. The mistakes removed and a new start available. Through faith in Jesus and his death once for all we can be forgiven, the slate wiped clean and a new relationship with God started. That is the love of God and the effect of faith and friends it is for anyone.

Richard Baxter who 3 centuries ago wrote the hymn ‘Ye holy angels bright’ speaking about John 3:16 which says “God so love the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life said, “I thank God for this word, “whoever”. If it had read there is mercy for Richard Baxter I would have thought it meant some other Richard Baxter. But this word “whoever” includes the worst of the Baxters that ever lived.” The word anyone includes all of us!

d. God's call v18-20a. The final thing to note as to Paul's motivation was that God had called him "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (v18). He knew he had received a special call from God. As Christians we all have this ministry, what Paul describes in v20 as being "Christ's ambassadors" but some, Paul included, had a special call and today some like myself have a special call to this role. But friends if any of us have heard Jesus say "follow me" we have been called to be ambassadors for him. This is our task and I wonder how we are doing as "Christ's ambassadors"? Just 10 days ago the English football fans in Germany sang songs about the two world wars. Not exactly the greatest ambassadors for our country. But what about us as we represent Christ at home, at work on the sport's field. I know I often let him down especially in the heat of battle on the sports field.

Why did Paul seek to "persuade men" especially in the light of all the problems he had because he wanted people to face God with confidence, because Jesus' love compelled him, because faith changes lives and because God called him to.

Friends as I draw this part of my ministry to an end I can say this has shaped my ministry. When I was 21 I was made aware of the amazing love of Jesus for me in his death on the cross and how through that death I could be forgiven and restored to God. Just three years later I heard God's call and over the years have sought in the light of God's great love for us and the joy of heaven to help people come to understand God's grace and the blessings of new life in Jesus. To those continuing or just beginning I would urge you to the same mindset.

This was Paul's task to "persuade men".

So secondly

2. What was his message? V18-21

What Paul tried to persuade people to do is very clear. "...gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation." (2 Cor 5:18-19). That was his message and that was what he said to these people in Corinth "We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God." (2 Cor 5:20)

What he was saying echoes down the centuries to those who are living lives with no reference to God at all. His message to you is be reconciled to God.

What does that mean?

I remember when I was young. A friend and I got caught up stealing little things from the local outdoor market, toys and things. It didn't really seem wrong at the time more like a game. But we got found out and I was sent to bed with the words ringing in my ear, "wait till your father gets home".

I was up in my bedroom separated by my wrong doing from my family. Friends that is our situation as humans. Our sin, and by that I don't just mean what we may have said and done wrong but our whole attitude to God which means we ignore him as God, all this cuts us off from God. We need to be reconciled to him.

In my bedroom I waited in some trepidation and a lot of tears. When Dad came home he came in to my bedroom and sat on the end of my bed and talked to me about the wrong I had done. He said I would have to go back to the market, take the things back and apologise to the stall owner. I knew I had let him down but that he had forgiven me and we were reconciled brought back together.

God has also acted to reconcile us to him. He has come to us in Jesus. Jesus died on the cross taking the punishment that you and I deserve for our sinful attitude towards our God. Through his death we can be forgiven and we can be restored as children of God. Paul's urgent plea which was at the heart of his ministry was "be reconciled to God." That has been my plea to many over the years of ministry God has given me and is my plea to us today "be reconciled to God."

But you may say why should I be reconciled to God?

My answer is fourfold and will be familiar from what I have already been saying.

a. because of God's call. God is calling you to come back to him and be reconciled to him. Like a father calling to child who is running away from him, a shepherd out searching for his lost sheep God is calling to you and urgently pleading with you to come back. Can you hear his call?

b. because of the effect of faith. Through reconciliation we can have our slate wiped clean and start a new life with God, the life God intended from the beginning and the life which Jesus described as abundant life. Surely we all want the best from life and God gives us that best.

c. because of Christ's love. We may be tempted to think all this doesn't really matter but then we need to see what Jesus has done for us. He died on a cross that we might be forgiven. How can we say it doesn't matter? It mattered to God so much that he sent his own son to die.

d. because we will face judgement. As Paul says we will one day face God and on that day the only plea which will be acceptable to a holy God is faith in Jesus and his death on the cross.

This is why we should be reconciled to God but how do we do it?

How can I be reconciled to God?

When my daughter Anna was very young we did everything for her. However it wasn't long before she began to assert her independence and one of her favourite expressions was "I do it my own". That is often how we view our life with God that somehow I need to make myself acceptable to God. But we can't. There is nothing that I can do to overcome my sin, nothing I can do to make myself acceptable to God. All I can do is accept what God has done for me in Jesus and his death on the cross.

You may be aware of the event in the gospels where people were bringing their kids to Jesus to have him touch them and the disciples were shooing them away. Jesus encouraged the kids to come saying (Mark 10.15) "I tell you the truth anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Now can we see the big word 'receive' – entry into God's kingdom or becoming God's child is something we receive but we receive it like a child.

A child is dependent – we are dependent upon what God has done.

A child is accepting – we have to accept what God has done

A child is trusting – we have to trust what God has done and not act as if somehow we can add to it.

The death of Jesus is totally sufficient – it is all I need for salvation and as I accept that so I can be sure it is sufficient for me.

Friends time has gone in so many ways. I thank God for being able to preach and teach his word over so many years and with Paul what I have under God sought to do boils down to I try to persuade people as I implore them on Christ's behalf "be reconciled to God."