

Let me ask you a question, “what is your image of a great leader?”

A second question, “what is your image of a Christian leader?”

Finally a third question did the adding of the word “Christian” make any difference to your thinking?

I think it may not have done. We want our Christian leaders, like our national leaders, to be strong, determined, successful and tough.

If that is how you think then perhaps as we go through 2 Corinthians in the first half of 2014 we may find what God had to say through Paul to these Christians in Corinth tough to take.

Corinth was a Roman colony built in 44BC on the site of a previously destroyed city. Being on the peninsular it became an important port and a rich place.

In AD 50-52 Paul spent 18 months in Corinth and brought the gospel to that place leaving behind a church which soon got into trouble, which caused him to write a first letter which we don't have.

Also while away the church received visits from Apollos, a gifted orator, and Peter, the leading apostle. It was the continuing problems in the church, along with the challenge to Paul's style of teaching, because of Apollos, and his nature as an apostle, in comparison with Peter, that caused Paul to write 1 Corinthians.

Some time in 55 or 56 he made a second “painful” visit (cf 2 Cor 2.1) to Corinth. It was after this visit he wrote 2 Corinthians to prepare the church for a third visit. 2 Corinthians is in many ways a defence of his role as an Apostle and through that we see that Christian leadership and ministry can at times appear weak, vulnerable and involve suffering.

Indeed, having reminded these Christians in the first sentence that he was an Apostle and by the call of Jesus not by self-appointment, he began the letter with suffering.

Just look at these opening verses, in v4 Paul speaks twice about “troubles”, then v5 “sufferings”, v6 “distressed” and “suffer”, v7 “sufferings”, v8 “hardships” and “great pressure” and v10 “deadly peril”.

There is so much about suffering in these opening verses. I wonder then how we feel about God in all this? Paul has obviously been through the mill so how does he view God?

Well perhaps unexpectedly he sees that

1. God is the Father of compassion v3-4a

What a great description of God, that he is the Father, or source, of compassion and a God who brings comfort to us in our troubles, the word troubles there means pressures. But what kind of pressures or troubles did Paul have in mind? Paul here was clearly speaking about the pressures he had experienced as a result of his ministry. He knew the pressure from outside the church of those who were opposed to him preaching the gospel and the pressure from those inside the church who

questioned his right to be an apostle and who denied his teaching. The pressures of ministry Paul knew only too well and perhaps we know them too. Perhaps we know troubles say at work or at home because of our faith in Christ. Perhaps we know troubles in the area of Christian ministry we are involved in at the moment. But then Paul refers to “all our troubles” and as we shall see later on in the letter Paul had been physically ill and had many other troubles even as we may have. However, in all these he knew the “comfort” of God. The word comfort there is “paraklesis” which means God coming alongside. He had suffered in many ways but he knew in every situation God had been there with him. That did not mean that the suffering had been taken away as we shall see but the strong sense that God was with and for him in his troubles.

This is the first point that Paul wants to make, that suffering is not a sign that God has left us rather God is with us in our suffering.

Jonathan Aitken in a newspaper article in December 1997 just months after he had lost his seat in Parliament and had lost a libel action against the Guardian said “So long as faith in our Lord Jesus Christ is one’s companion in life’s dark valleys, then even a painful Christmas can still be a joyful Christmas”. Faith in the presence of God even in our darkest moments.

2. suffering unites us v4a-7

Paul was very clear that God being with us through our troubles was not just for our own benefit but for the benefit of others too. He comforts us “so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (v4).

One writer describes it like the difference between Euston and Crewe. Euston is a terminus – the train ends there but Crewe is a junction leading on to many other destinations. The point is God’s comfort given to us should not stop with us but flow on through us to others.

Paul gives us an example of this in 2 Cor 7:6&7, “But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him.”

Paul had received God’s comfort by the return of Titus to him Titus had received God’s comfort from the Christians in Corinth whom now Paul writes in order to comfort them.

It is so often the case that when we have been through troubles we are then able to help others who are going through similar troubles. It helps us to have an empathy with them and therefore a unity. It is a picture of the church as a body where we seek to help support and bring God’s comfort to each other. So what is it that you have been through that you could use to comfort others? The encouragement here is to be a Crewe not a Euston.

But then Paul shows another way in which suffering unites us in v11 “as you help us by your prayers”.

It is through prayer that we can bring comfort to others and in prayer we share in their troubles.

We stand at the beginning of a new year and while I am not one for making resolutions I do like to use Kairos moments in response to the word of God to move me forward in the Christian faith. So as we see how Paul commended these Christians in Corinth for their prayer support I would encourage us to take time to think about who we support in prayer. Be it family, friends, church contacts, mission partners, Christians suffering persecution. The list is endless and because it is we need to be selective. But God brings comfort to those in trouble as we pray.

3. Even leaders suffer v8

Whatever we think of Paul this verse makes it clear that his was not the all conquering, triumphant, problem free Christian life – far from it. We are not sure what exactly it was that Paul was referring to here but see the note of despair there. Then let me ask again one of the questions we began with, “what is your image of a Christian leader?” Is this it? I would think probably not. There was no doubt that Paul was tough, you only have to see what he went through. There is no doubt that he was a leader and that many like Timothy and Titus followed his lead. There is no doubt that he was successful as we see people coming to faith and churches being established. However, his was not the problem free life. Paul would never have been a proponent of what is known as the prosperity gospel, which denies poverty and indeed problems in the Christian life. So Kenneth Copeland, one of the proponents of this false doctrine, comments, “the basic principle of the Christian life is to know that God put our sin, sickness, disease, sorrow, grief, and poverty on Jesus at Calvary.” By his understanding we should not experience any of these things in our lives. Yet Paul did and going back to v5 spoke of the “sufferings of Christ flowing over into our lives”. Suffering is part of every life even the Christian leader that is the reality of life and also part of God’s working in our lives.

I remember after one serious problem in my life some friends sent me this poem which I think originated with Corrie ten Boom, “My life is but a weaving between my God and me.

I cannot choose the colours He weaveth steadily.

some times He weaveth sorrow; And I in foolish pride

Forget He sees the upper And I the underside.

Not ’til the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly

Will God unroll the canvas and reveal the reason why.

The dark threads are as needful in the weaver’s skillful hand

As the threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has planned.”

It is in suffering that often God shapes us and those who are Christian leaders need that as much if not more than others.

4. some results of suffering v9-11

The thread through all this is that Paul did not see suffering as a negative. He began v3 with praise to God and here we see some of the results of suffering.

a. the first was a new reliance on God, v9. Whatever it was Paul faced, which he thought he could not endure, it led him to rely wholly on God. He had no power to change his situation and no hope in his own abilities. There was no other option than to rely on God.

I remember a few months back being asleep in bed and being woken by the cries of “Grandad, Grandad.” I rushed in to see what was wrong and Caleb, our oldest grandson, was screaming because he had lost his pillow.” Please don’t say “ah bless”! The point is that in the dark and strange room he felt unable to act to help himself and he did what was natural shouted for granddad. Paul here is saying the same, that when all human hope was gone he was forced to rely on God and he did not find God wanting. One of the privileges of the job I do is sharing with people and in these last months I have heard a number of stories of people at rock bottom who have cried out to God and he has answered their prayers. Suffering can bring us a new reliance on God.

b. Patient endurance v6 – not all of our problems will be taken away from us. Later on we will see Paul speaking about his thorn in the flesh which God did not take away from him but he did give him both the strength and the perspective to endure. In our suffering we keep our eyes on Jesus who suffered and died for us and we hold onto him and his promises and as we do that and as we endure our suffering. What is it that you face at the moment? How do you view it? Through prayer we ask God for strength for today. The strength to patiently endure. As we do that we know that whatever troubles we have they will one day pass away and

c. brings a new hopev10 “on him we have set our hope”. The hope here is for deliverance. Whatever it was Paul had suffered in Asia God had delivered him from it and that gave him a new confidence for that greater deliverance at the end of time.

Do you remember the account in Daniel 3 of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego being put into the furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar? Before they went in they said, “If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O King, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” (Dan 3:17-18)

God is able to deliver us from the troubles of life and to bring us into eternity. However at times he will allow us to go through suffering but in it all our hope is on him and is certain. Strength for today yes but also bright hope for tomorrow.

So what was Paul saying to these Christians in Corinth? He was affirming that he is a true Apostle but one who knew what it was to suffer as he followed Christ and sought to serve him. However he did not see that suffering as negative because he knew that the “God of all comfort” was with him in his

suffering, that he could rely on God to deliver him from his suffering either now or in the future. So in his suffering he relied on God, he patiently endured and he placed his hope in God and in that day when there will be no more suffering. This is the image of the Christian leader and through it he encouraged these Christians and you and I to follow this same path in the troubles that we might experience and as we find God's comfort and help to use that to bring comfort and help to others.