

I remember sitting talking with my parents some time early in 1976 – yes this is a history lesson for some of you younger people! I was trying to explain to them my decision to resign my post of Head of RE in a Comprehensive School and go to a theological college to train for ordination. Neither of my parents were followers of Jesus Christ and while they were not anti my faith they struggled to understand it. My father's response to what I had said was "why?" He could not understand why I wanted to give up a good job which was fairly well paid with good prospects to become a Vicar! I have to confess that over the years at low moments I have sometimes asked myself the same question!

Many of us I am sure are aware that it is not always easy and comfortable being a servant of Jesus and it is especially not always easy and comfortable sharing our faith. Gospel ministry can be tough. Perhaps you have found that out yourself. It may be that last week you invited someone to the Ladies' film night or men's breakfast and were turned down. Perhaps you have been praying for years for a relative or friend to come to faith and there seems no sign of that happening. You may have had an opportunity recently to speak to someone about your faith and bottled it. Or you may be aware that your behaviour in a certain situation has not been good and you feel you let Jesus down. It can be hard seeking to share the gospel and we can get discouraged.

Paul certainly had plenty of reason to be discouraged.

Here was man who had been at the top of the Jewish academic and religious tree. He was liked respected and had good prospects. However, he had thrown it all away to become a Christian missionary. And for what? If we look at vs 8-9 we see just what a struggle it was for him.

These Christian he was writing to knew that because he had been in Corinth with them for 18 months and they had seen the battles he had faced with the Jews in that city. But it wasn't just because of opposition from outside the church that Paul found it tough. He was writing this letter because those in the church were also giving him grief.

He was hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down but look at 4:1, "we do not lose heart" then look at 4:16 "we do not lose heart."

As we look at these verses we see something of why Paul did not lose heart and hopefully as we look at them God's word will encourage us in our own witness for Jesus.

Paul wrote "we do not lose heart". Why was he able to say that?

1. because it is God's work v1-6

"Therefore since through God's mercy we have this ministry we do not lose heart" v1.

a. gospel ministry is from God. We have seen this before and it is one of the things Paul continues to say to these Christians because he knew there were questions over his ministry. 1:1, "Paul an

apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God”; 2:17 “we speak before God with sincerity like men sent from God”. It is God who had called and gifted Paul for this ministry and it was to God he was responsible not to any human. As it was God given ministry and as he was accountable to God he fulfilled that ministry with integrity as we see in v2. He rejected any idea of deceiving people, of distorting the truth and instead set out God’s truth plainly. He may well have written this because others who were there in Corinth were not following the same pattern.

There is always a pressure when sharing our faith to try and make it acceptable to the person we are talking to – do you find that?

I know I do. I can’t count how many times I have done the Christianity Explained course with people but I know that each time I have the same pressure from within. It comes when we are looking at the resurrection of Jesus. There are some pretty tough things to be said and especially about heaven and hell. The course book suggests the leader uses 2 Thess 1:9-10 to emphasise the final and devastating nature of this division for those who reject Jesus. There it says, “They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people.”

I always hesitate to use that verse because it seems so harsh and dogmatic. I worry that it will put people off and I suppose deep down I worry that they will think me judgemental. Yet to fail to make people aware of the consequence of their choices is to do them a disservice. But the pressure to water it down is there.

What Paul is saying here is he does not lose heart because the ministry is from God and because of that he fulfils it with integrity always speaking the truth.

So for us while there may be difficulties in sharing the good news with others it is what God has called us to as followers of Jesus and so we press on and so we do it with the same integrity that Paul had. There is so much that is positive in the gospel of God’s love and grace and mercy which we may find easy to share and others to hear but we must not hide either the cost of following Jesus or the result of rejecting his offer of life. So when you are talking with your contact person don’t be tempted to cloud the truth, to tell only half the story. Of course we are sharing god’s love because God does love all people and he wants all to know his love. But there must be an integrity in what we say, for like Paul, as we saw earlier “we speak before God with sincerity like men sent from God”. (2:17)

b. Paul didn’t lose heart because God can save.

Paul was well aware, as we saw last week, that many people are blinded to the truth of the gospel. It is as if there is a veil over their minds. This is a result of living in a material world. People we only accept what they can physically see – the god of this age of the physical world has as it were blinded

them, v4. I'm sure many of us have found the same in sharing our faith or even in casual contact with non-Christians and the easy put down of faith being hocus pocus, airy fairy and so on with the implication that the only reality is what can be touched and seen. In the face of such attitudes and thoughts we may feel inadequate. However, Paul here reminds us that it is God who turns people around. It is God who removes the veil and opens blind eyes, v6 "For God made his light to shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ".

God had done it in the life of Paul, removing the veil, he has done it in the lives of many people here. He can do it in your life if you are not yet a follower of Jesus. He can do it in the life of your contact person. So we don't lose heart because God can and does bring people to know him in and through Jesus Christ.

We do not lose heart because it is God's work and

2. because of God's power v7-12

As we look at vs8-12 they are very stark and hard to read. Just look at them with me and see what Paul said about the ministry he was involved in.

In vs8-9 he speaks of being hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted and struck down. Then in v10 he wrote "we always carry around in our body the death (or dying) of Jesus." That is every day he was aware of the physical and emotional pain that preaching the gospel brought and it was like the pain of the cross, the pain of sacrifice.

The point he was making was that in his experience gospel ministry was costly. Perhaps we have found that so at work if we are unwilling to bend the rules like others may or with family where we may miss out events because of Christian commitments. One writer says, "While there are great compensations, all ministry is costly not only in terms of what one relinquishes to pursue it but also in the accompanying misunderstanding or abuse, perhaps from friends and family."

With all that Paul was going through no wonder in v7 he referred to himself a "jar of clay".

So with all this going on all the pressure and persecution and so on why did he carry on? Why does he not lose heart?

The answer as we can see in these verses is because of God's power. As he wrote in v7 we are fragile and fallible just like a clay jar but all that does is highlight the power of God. Yes we are hard pressed but because of God's power we are not crushed – he upholds us and enables us to stand. Yes we are perplexed and can't understand always what is happening and why but through God's strength we don't slip into despair. Yes we carry in our bodies the dying of Jesus but, as we see in v12, that results in life in others and God brings the treasure of the knowledge of his glory to people in Jesus. Is that how you see it and experience it? I know many of us do see ourselves as frail and never more so than when we think about sharing our faith. We worry about knowing what to say, about being

able to answer questions. We worry about missing opportunities or being rejected. We feel frail and so we should because then we will trust in the power of God. Then we will ask God to help us see the opportunities, to have the words to say, the love to show, the grace not only to answer questions but to ask them as well. We will turn to God in prayer and ask him to work in power in ways which we can't do and we will have to rely on him. He will not let us down That is not to say everyone we pray for or speak to will come to faith but as we trust in God's power we will find him faithful and active.

So going back to where I began you may have found sharing your faith tough, you may have invited people to things and been rejected or said something about your faith and people not appeared to be interested. You may have been praying for someone for years and not seen any change and the temptation is to stop a bit like banging your head against the wall! Please let me encourage all of us not to stop because this is God's work, he wants people to come to know Jesus, because God does save people and because God has the power to save. Let me encourage you to take heart from God's word, to look with fresh eyes at your contact people and to continue in prayer for them, to look for opportunities to speak to them and to ask God for wisdom to use those opportunities.

We do not lose heart because it is God's work, because of God's power and

3. because he had faith (v13-15)

Why was it that Paul did not lose heart and continued to preach the gospel even when things were not going well? Part of the answer is there for us in v13 "we also believe and therefore speak".

It was a matter of faith, faith in the gospel certainly and as we have been seeing faith in God's power to act but also as we see in v14 faith in the resurrection. The Christian hope of eternal life is what drives him on and as he says in v15 it is for the benefit of others because as he preaches and people come to faith so through the gospel ministry multiplies, overflowing to others who coming to faith themselves offer praise and thanksgiving to God.

Paul had faith in the gospel and its power to change lives. That was why he did not lose heart.

His faith caused him to act even when at times human logic might have told him not to, but he did because he knew God's desire to save, God's power to save and he saw God at work in salvation. So he continued to speak the gospel that is faith.

I remember years back taking a trip to Israel. At one point we ended up at the Dead Sea and many of us went for a swim. You may be aware that because of the high mineral content of the water it is impossible to sink and so there we were floating about. However, one guy was standing upright and refused to float because he couldn't swim. Despite all the evidence there he refused to take his feet off the bottom – he lacked the faith.

It is faith in who God is, in what God has called us to and in the power of God that will help us, like Paul, not to lose heart as we share God's love with others.

If we believe, then like Paul we should speak for it is through the gospel that God tends to bring his light in to the hearts and minds of people.

We know it is not easy. We know we will have many set backs. There will be times when what we say will be at best questioned and at worst rejected. We may suffer for sharing our faith or just for being a follower of Jesus. We will be seen by the world as out of step. However it is God's work, God has called us as he called Paul, to be witnesses for Jesus Christ. He has placed us among people who need to hear of God's love and he has give us the gospel, which Paul reminds us "is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" Ro 1:16 – it is God's power which will bring people to faith and this is what we believe.

"We do not lose heart", it is God's work, in God's power and so we have faith that God will do it.