

HOLY TRINITY SUNNINGDALE

Date: Sunday 21 June 2015

Reading: 2 Cor 6:1-13

Theme: Fathers' Day

We are making our way through a short mini-series of sermons on part of the second letter Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth.

We have seen something of the background of Paul himself and his life experience, something of what it might mean for people to be new creations once they make the decision to follow Jesus. Last week we were looking at the challenge of home and away: life in the “tent” of this life now and the promise of life in the “permanent building” being prepared by God for us to live in one day.

This morning it's Fathers' Day and we come to a really interesting part of the letter. What I want to say this morning is all about Paul, paradox and persecution.

The story is told of a dad flying home from a business trip. He was sitting across the aisle from a woman and her eight-year-old son. He couldn't help laughing as they neared their destination and he heard the mother say to the little boy, “Now remember: when we land run to Dad first, then to the dog.”

Or the story of the daughter who had just received her provisional driving licence and it was her birthday. Her dad had agreed to take her out for her first driving lesson. With a big grin, he got in the back behind the driver's seat. “Why aren't you sitting up front on the passenger's side?” she asked. “Darling, he said: I've been waiting for this moment ever since you were a little girl. Now it's my turn to sit back here and kick the seat.”

Or my favourite story ... a father was passing by his son's bedroom was astonished to see that his bed was nicely made and everything was picked up off the floor. Then he saw an envelope, propped up on the pillow that was addressed to 'Dad.'

With dread he opened the envelope and read the letter.

Dear Dad,

It is with great regret and sorrow that I'm writing you. I have had to elope with my new girlfriend because I wanted to avoid a scene with you and mum. I have found real passion with Stacy and she is so nice.

But I knew you would not approve of her because of all her piercing, tattoos, tight motorcycle gear and the fact that she is much older than I am. But it's not only the passion...Dad she's pregnant. Stacy said that we will be very happy.

She owns a trailer in the woods and has a stack of firewood for the whole winter. We share a dream of having many more children.

Stacy has opened my eyes to the fact that marijuana doesn't really hurt anyone. We'll be growing it for ourselves and trading it with the other people that live nearby for cocaine and ecstasy. In the meantime we will pray that science will find a cure for cancer so Stacy can get better. She really deserves it.

Don't worry Dad. I'm 15 now and I do know how to take care of myself.

Someday I'm sure that we will be back to visit so that you can get to know your grandchildren.

Your loving son, John

PS. Dad, none of the above is true. I'm over at Tommy's.

PPS. I just wanted to remind you that there are worse things in life than a bad school report. Mine's in my middle desk drawer. I love you. Call me when it's safe to come home.

As you know Sue and I have been away this week on retreat. Sue went to a Christian Retreat Centre in Poole in Dorset and I went to a little village in Hampshire to stay in a hut at the bottom of a family's garden.

While I was away I finished reading a book I had begun some time ago called "Paradoxology". It's written by a guy called Krish Kandiah. He talks about the ways in which so very often we have one idea about life the universe and everything and God has quite a different one. What he seems to be doing and what he is actually doing may be two quite different things. I have found that personally very helpful.

What we find here in chapter 6 is exactly this kind of paradox going on in the life of Paul day to day. God seems to be using Paul in a powerful way to extend his kingdom and reach new people with the gospel message. But at the same time, Paul is going through it (we'll come to his rant in a minute) and the Christians in Corinth seem to finding it hard to stick with what they have been taught and have learned from him. What God seems to be doing and what he is actually doing.

And although that may sound a bit grim, it is really helpful as I feel sure that it's our own experience too if we're really honest. The Christian life is not just one long wonderful journey to glory. It's a challenge and a struggle and it's three steps forward and two steps back an awful lot of the time. Ministry is hard work and being a disciple of Jesus is not an easy ride always. We'll come back to this ...

The letter, in so many places, is all about relationship: Paul's relationship with the Christians in Corinth and his

desire for them to follow Jesus, to be authentic and effective disciples in the culture and climate of their day.

It's not always easy to hold fast to the life-style Jesus commends when there are temptations all around. So many of the people the Corinthian Christians would know well and live closely with would quite probably seem to doing very well without God, thank you very much. To maintain their Christian faith and hold it strong in that climate is not an easy thing.

Very interestingly, at Ascot on Friday when Sue and Liz and I were there, I had a most interesting conversation with someone who is a successful Christian restaurateur. He was really pleased to see the chaplaincy presence ... especially with the rich, especially with those who have resources ... because, as he put it: they often feel that they don't need God and that money can solve all their problems.

It was really encouraging to hear these words, to feel that we were doing a worthwhile job, as we sat and had afternoon tea. We had been invited by a new friend we had made at the LYCIG course just a few weeks ago. God is good at putting things together for us and putting people in our way sometimes.

But this business of the faith and the discipleship of the comfortable, is exactly what Paul is dealing with here.

Paul emphasises again and again what he has been through to help the Christians in Corinth to live well as disciples of Jesus, to model a life that they should follow, to commend his way of thinking, speaking and doing life as rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus himself.

He explains clearly that it's often been a paradox and it's been very costly: in vv4-10 there is a great catalogue of what the cost has been. This level of transparency and openness he describes as "speaking frankly" and "having a wide open heart", v11. There is "no restriction in our affection", he says in v12.

In other words he is saying – you know all this stuff, I am just not sure what you are doing about it.

Another book I read while I was away this week is called "Communicating for a Change". It's written by a man called Andy Stanley from Northpoint Ministries in Atlanta, Georgia. He says that whenever he is preparing a sermon or a talk or preparing some teaching material for a group, he asks two questions which come right at the end of his message, questions for the audience to wrestle with: So what? And now what? What is the impact of what we have learned together? What difference is this going to make to my thinking? What am I going to do about it? This is exactly the question Paul is asking here.

This level of paradox, this level of challenge whilst particular to Paul in some respects, is also part of what we

experience day to day as children, young people and adults. We often know what God wants for us but how is our thinking changing and what are we doing about it?

There are two sets of paradoxes introduced by two phrases:

V4: We have commended ourselves ... this one is about how Paul has gone about his ministry, how he has conducted himself, what has happened to him

V8: We are treated as ... this one is about how Paul's ministry has been perceived/received by the Christians in Corinth and elsewhere.

We have commended ourselves ... two lists: one of bad stuff happening to him and one of qualities. And the paradox is that you would have thought that the bad stuff happening would produce a certain result or response in Paul. The qualities indicate that this is absolutely not so. It's a surprise and a bit of a shock. It's a paradox.

Bad stuff happening in vv4 and 5

Great endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger

Quite a long list of painful, uncomfortable, unpleasant things Paul and his mates have had to put up with or have put themselves through. And he says that these things

should be signs of his being commended. He is ranting about all he has done for these people. Is he being arrogant? Is he just showing off? Is he just utterly fed and laying it all out on the table? Is he saying: what we have given you flipping Corinthians has been really tough, has been really hard graft, has been really challenging?

Maybe he is ... but look at the paradox. Look at the second list, a list of

Qualities he sets out in vv6-8:

Because he says they have experienced all this bad stuff with

Purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech and the power of God with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left, in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute.

This is really interesting. It's been terrible, he says, but you have also seen these things in us ... good things, honourable things, amazing things which you would just not have expected to see. This is a wonderful paradox.

What God seemed be doing (giving Paul and his mates a really hard time) and what he was actually doing (allowing them to show grace and develop Christian character) is both bizarre and thrilling at the same time.

The key question for us is this: are we so into God and doing what he wants that we too could find ourselves in this world of paradox? Could we/ would we be able to respond so well under such pressure? Could we display such Christian character when we might be expected to fight back or wreak revenge in some way for our mistreatment?

Martin Luther King says this: “The ultimate measure of a person is not where they stand in moments of comfort and convenience, but where they stand at times of challenge and controversy.”

That’s the first paradox. What he seems to be doing and what he is actually doing may be two quite different things.

The second is in vv 8-10

We are treated as ... here there is a list of two sets of words which sit very uneasily side by side, describing the reality of the situation. With each there is a negative and a positive – another paradox.

Imposters, true, Unknown/well known, Dying/ alive, Punished/not killed, Sorrowful/rejoicing, Poor/making many rich, Having nothing/possessing everything.

What God seemed be doing (allowing Paul and his mates to be treated really badly) and what he was actually doing (allowing them not only to survive but also in surviving

show grace and develop Christian character) is also both bizarre and thrilling at the same time.

Those in Christian ministry are not always treated well. Those who stand up for their faith are not always treated well – at home, in the office, with friends and colleagues, life can be tough.

In the wider world, standing up for what you believe in can literally be life-threatening. This week Kathryn and some of her colleagues from school have been a trip to the battle fields of the first world war. The sights of the memorial tablets, the rows and rows of clean white graves, the lists of names carved in the stone and held in huge books are a poignant reminder of what some have given for the sake of monarch and country, for the sake of the freedom of those who would come after.

In the years since the first world war, we know that wars continue. And we know that the persecution of Christians is a present day reality ... standing up for your faith is for some a matter of life and death. And it’s another paradox.

The Vicar of Baghdad is in exile. Andrew White backed the 2003 invasion in Iraq and afterwards restored St George's, the only Anglican church in the country. He has endured kidnappings, bombings and the recent onslaught of Islamic State, which forced him to leave in the face of grave threats to his life. Now, he is pushing for more war, saying

the countries that invaded Iraq must go back in force to stop IS.

When he moved outside his church, White was protected by up to 35 Iraqi guards. He now divides most of his time between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, speaking of the plight of Iraq's Christians wherever he can.

He left Iraq in October 2014, after Justin Welby, in White's words, said: "Basically, I'm more use alive than dead." "I had to agree with him," he adds. "I listened very seriously to him. I might not like it. But both he and my bishop said I really needed to be out of there". He describes their current situation as "bad, bad, bad". He does not know if the church was responding to a specific threat when it asked him to leave but he says, so long as he is a vicar, he must obey. Reflecting on the situation there, he uses a mixture of black humour and passionate advocacy. But the most striking thing about the conversation is the grim understatement. This is a man for whom the abnormal has become normal.

"I'm in touch with my people every day", he says. When asked how it feels to be apart, he adds: "Very painful. But I know it's the right thing. I may have objected vehemently originally [to leaving] but I know it the right thing. If I was there, they would eventually get me. My being there also puts my people at more risk. It's bad enough being a Christian but an ex-pat Christian? It's not very good."

Paul, paradox and persecution – it's all here.

For many us life may seem pretty tame. Maybe our problems seem rather puny by comparison with some of the things we know are going on in the world. But maybe we could ask some questions around the paradox we been addressing fundamentally ... that what God seems to be doing and what he is actually doing in us, with us and through us may be two quite different things.

I am going to finish this morning with a "so what, what now" kind of question ... it's set up for us by a man called John Ortberg, a teacher from the US. It's a question Paul would clearly have answered yes to. What about us? What will we say? Ortberg sets up the questions this way:

"For still in our day the call of the carpenter comes again to that man or that women, follow me, see what I see, love what I love, follow me. Will you be that man? Will you be that women? Will you devote yourselves whatever it costs to that man and the expanded vision of His kingdom? Will you give your life to the man who was given for the sake of the world? For he alone mastered life, he alone conquered death, he alone overcame sin, he alone grows present with every passing year. He is the Son of God, He is glory of human kind, the crucified carpenter of the Nazareth is the hope of the nations and the Saviour of the world and that's who this man is." John Ortberg*

Let's pray ...