

**3 September 2017**

**Matthew 16.21-28, Romans 12.9-21**

***The demands of discipleship***

There are different types of comedian. There are the comedians who tell long convoluted stories with a punchline at the end. And there are those comedians who are good at one-liners, and who move from one joke to another.

At the end of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival they always publish a list of the 15 favourite one-liner jokes of that year's festival.

The winner this year, was a joke by Ken Cheng: "I'm not a fan of the new pound coin, but then again, I hate all change."

I enjoyed some of the others as well:

Alexei Sale: "I've given up asking rhetorical questions. What's the point?"

Adele Cliff: "As a vegan, I think people who sell meat are disgusting. But apparently people who sell fruit and veg are grocer."

Tim Vine: "I went to a Pretenders gig. It was a tribute act."

You don't often get comedians who manage to do both. Both the long anecdote and the one-liner.

Now, if the apostle Paul were a comedian – I think he would probably try to do both.

Now I have to say that there is not a lot of evidence that he was particularly funny – and one story in Acts suggests that he was sometimes boring, because it tells of someone falling asleep while listening to him one night. Unfortunately the person in question was sitting on a window ledge at the time and fell out of the window!

But Paul's writing style seems to fluctuate between two extremes.

Much of the time he explores a theological theme much like a comedian telling a very long shaggy dog story ... exploring every nook and cranny of the theme ... getting as much out of it as he can ... and eventually coming to the punchline.

But then Paul will suddenly change style and turn to a sequence of one-liners. Almost as if he turns into a different kind of comedian, or a different kind of writer.

Gone are the long-winded arguments. You suddenly come across a series of pithy statements that are given little explanation, and could easily be written in bullet points.

And that's just what we come across in this section in Romans chapter 12 that we have read this morning.

From the long flowing arguments of the first twelve and a half chapters, Paul changes gear and changes style and gives these wonderfully memorable one-liners as a reminder of the way that these early Christians should meet the demands of being a follower of Jesus.

- Let love be genuine
- Hate evil
- Cling on to the good
- Be joyful in hope
- Be patient in affliction
- Be faithful in prayer
- Share with those in need
- Practise hospitality

And he just fires these off, one after the other, hoping that his readers are keeping up with him.

And this advice for Christian living – for meeting the demands of Christian discipleship – come in two sections

Verses 9-13 contain advice for remaining faithful to Christ within the Christian community.

The first thing to note is that Paul assumes that Christians should be willing to take ownership of their spiritual health and well-being.

Paul is well aware that Christian living is difficult

- it is never straightforward living in community with others
- he talks quite openly of Christians facing affliction and being in need
- he knows that our spiritual fervour tends to go up and down

- he is well aware that Christians face persecution and misunderstanding

But he is also convinced that we can take ownership of our spiritual health in the midst of all of this. None of this, as far as Paul is concerned, is an excuse for us to allow our spiritual flame to burn low.

He is saying, in the midst of all of the stuff that is happening to you, there are some things that you can choose to do. There are some things that you can choose to take control of.

1. You can choose to live the way of love
  - a. and you can choose to let your love be genuine and practical
  - b. and you can adopt attitudes and actions that speak of genuine love
  - c. you can opt to be the kind of person that honours others higher than yourself
  - d. actions – responding to need and practising hospitality

This is all made possible because of the transformation that Jesus can bring to our lives.

We need to read this in the context of the opening verses of chapter 12.

v2 “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

2. You can choose to keep your spiritual fervour – with its focus on serving the Lord
  - a. not about always being on an emotional high, but having a focus of mind and heart, that gives us consistency
  - b. this is the kind of fervour that comes from recognising that the whole of our life can be lived in an attitude of ‘serving the Lord’
  - c. keeping the flame of faith alive and burning – like the pilot light in a boiler that remains there – sometimes the boiler is going full tilt ... at other times it the flames can burn low ... but the pilot light is the constant  
And Paul goes on to spell out what this might mean in practice.
  - d. we can choose to be people of hope, even in the midst of challenge and change – and the choice is to be hopeful because of the promise that Jesus brings, which, because of the hope, is a choice for joy even when surrounded by suffering.

- e. we can choose to be patient when troubles come upon us, trusting in the ultimate goodness of God – not an impersonal stoicism accepting our fate – but a personal trust in God’s love at the heart of all things. We can be patient with our mixed up world, if you like, because God is patient with our mixed up world.
- f. we can choose to be faithful in prayer – letting prayer become part of the warp and weft of our daily living, part of the discipline of our lives, sustaining a living relationship with God. Not allowing prayer to become something that I do when I feel like it, or when I think I need to.

When I was preparing our service of favourite prayers for the second Sunday in August, I came across a prayer which is perhaps a lesson in how not to follow all that Paul teaches us here about remaining focused on loving others and loving God.

Dear Lord,

Help me to relax about insignificant details, beginning tomorrow at 7:41:23 a.m. EST.

Help me to consider people's feelings, even if most of them are hypersensitive.

Help me to take responsibility for the consequences of my actions, even though they're usually not my fault.

Help me to not try to run everything - but, if you need some help, please feel free to ask me.

Help me to be more laid back, and help me to do it exactly right.

Help me to take things more seriously, especially laughter, parties, and dancing.

Give me patience, and I mean right now!

Help me not be a perfectionist. (Did I spell that correctly?)

Help me to do only what I can, and trust you for the rest. And would you mind putting that in writing please?

Keep me open to others' ideas, misguided though they may be.

Thank you, Lord.

Amen

Having focused on our life with one another, and our life with God, Paul then proceeds to talk about how Christians should conduct themselves beyond the Christian community – how we relate to the society around and about us.

And what is clear is that our attitude to the wider society should be guided by the same attitude of heart and mind that shapes our relationships within the church.

Paul is still effectively telling us what it means for our love to be sincere and genuine. Because if love guides us in our relationships within the fellowship of the church, then love guides us also in our relationships beyond the church.

And it is quite clear that the focus of attention has changed in v14 because Paul first of all addresses how Christians should respond to persecution:

- Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse.

We'll come back to this, because Paul comes back to this theme himself, as he unpacks how Christians should conduct themselves in a hostile environment.

But if we recognise that Paul has now turned his attention to how we relate to those outside the church community, it gives a very different feel to how we read vv 15 & 16.

- Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.
  - This is much more than Paul telling us to be sympathetic to one another in the Christian church
  - This is Paul telling us to show our love and compassion, by entering into the life-stories of those all around us, whether within the church or not -
    - joining in community celebrations when things have gone well in people's lives
    - participating in people's lives by coming alongside those who are suffering, feeling their pain

- We all find it much easier to enter into the circumstances of those who are like us, and much more difficult to feel the suffering of those who are different
  - It is interesting to note the large amount of press and media coverage that has been given to the hurricane in Texas during this past week, and the relatively smaller amount of coverage that has been given to the effects of the monsoon in South Asia, affecting an estimated 14 million people across Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Is it because we feel more of an affinity with the people of Houston than the people of Islamabad?
- Live in harmony with one another
  - We are called to be people of peace in the world – people who work for reconciliation, understanding and harmony in each and every context in which we live
  - Paul recognises that ‘it takes two to tango’ – that it’s not just up to us – that some people just make it impossible to live peaceably:

v. 18 “If it is possible, *as far as it depends on you*, live at peace with everyone.”

Paul is a realist. He acknowledges that we cannot always create peaceable environments.

- As followers of Jesus, we should always be at the forefront of working for peace and justice – whether it be at the work-place, in the local neighbourhood, in relations between different religions, in international relations or in family relationships.
- Do not be proud; associate with people of low position; do not be conceited
  - Again, it is important to hear this as advice for how we conduct ourselves with people beyond the Christian community.
  - It is not enough for followers of Jesus to show a certain humility within the Christian church, but then beyond the confines of the Christian church to become high and mighty, looking down on

others, abusing position and authority, enjoying privilege and prestige.

- And then we come back to where we began – the authentic heart of the Christian gospel – the distinctive element of Christian ethics that will make the followers of Jesus stand out in the world:

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.” (v 14)

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil” (v 17)

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (v 21)

This became the heart of the early Christian way of life because

1. This was the distinctive way of life taught by Jesus – Jesus revolutionized the way we should act towards our enemies.
2. This was the way of life that Jesus lived and the way that Jesus died – even on the cross Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them – they know not what they do.”

Paul didn’t need to say any of this. This would have been obvious to the Christians he was writing to. But he does go on to support this way of life with two further explanations:

3. One obvious objection to this is way of living that it appears to allow the evil to get away with it – to get off the hook. Shouldn’t people be made to suffer for their evil? What about the demands of justice?

Paul says – “We leave that with God.” He quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures ““It is mine to avenge, I will repay,” says the Lord.’

4. Then he quotes from Proverbs 25.21-22:

If your enemy is hungry, feed him;  
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this you will heap burning coals on his head.

Although ambiguous, it is thought that this saying is intended to point to the way in which such acts of mercy can have a transformative impact upon those who are loved – such that their hearts may burn with shame and remorse because of the love that is offered to them.

So hear this encouragement from Paul to follow the way of Jesus:

- Let love be genuine
- Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer
- Bless those who persecute you – bless and do not curse
- Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good