

**24 June 2018**

**2 Corinthians 6.1-13**

**Open wide your hearts**

You will find in Rome today a modern reproduction of the Res Gestae Divi Augustus (The Deeds of the Divine Augustus). This is the funerary inscription of the first Roman Emperor Augustus. But it wasn't written by others as a tribute to all that Augustus had done through his life. No Augustus himself wrote an account of all of his achievements, and left the script with his will with instructions to the Senate to have the inscription carved in stone and displayed.

It goes through his military career, his public benefactions and his military accomplishments. And he writes himself up!

But what Augustus did, all sorts of other people did as well ... perhaps not in such a grand style. Nevertheless, if they had the opportunity they would have their achievements carved in stone for all to see and celebrate.

And what the great and the good did, to some extent modelled behaviour for the wider society ... and not least in Corinth, a city that had been totally re-built and re-colonised by the Romans. Honour is all about establishing your credentials, listing your achievements, parading your accomplishments.

People knew how to recognise those who were marked out for leadership. You would be able to trace their successful path. They would be able to point to the victories they had won in war, the wisdom with which they had governed, the amenities they had provided to the local community, the money they had made in commerce. All of this was measurable and quantifiable.

And it would seem as if this attitude had made its way into the Christian church in Corinth. Although the church is called to be counter-cultural, so often the church simply reflects the culture of the society in which it is set. It seems to have been this way in Corinth.

In particular they seem to have preconceived ideas about what a leader will look like and do ... But those ideas are not shaped and moulded by the gospel story, but are drawn largely from the expectations of the wider society. It seems as if they expected their leaders to be able to back up their claims for leadership with an impressive resume of all of the things that they had achieved within their Christian journey. This was what impressed the Corinthians. And this was what they expected of Paul.

If they did any kind of leadership training in the church, they probably knew exactly what kind of leader they wanted to turn out:



... and Paul didn't fit their mould!

Paul's credentials as an authentic apostle and leader of God's people had been called into question. There were clearly some high points of Paul's career that everyone knew about ... but when it came down to it there were a whole number of question marks as well.

- He had a reputation for causing trouble in the cities he visited.

- He often found himself on the wrong side of local leaders – whether Jewish or Roman ... and had a record of imprisonments and beatings
- He could be brash and straightforward in his speaking
- There were times when his plans seemed to change on nothing more than a whim
- He put people's noses out of joint, because he refused to accept financial help from the benefactors of the community ... which meant that chose to keep on working as a tent-maker (of all things!) to support his ministry

His record as an apostle was not one of unremitting success after success ... There were too many things that were difficult to airbrush out of his public story. He had certainly not walked up the ecclesiastical 'cursus honorum' – at least, not as far as some of the Corinthians were concerned.

So this passionate, heartfelt letter that Paul writes to the Corinthians is largely taken up with Paul trying to defend himself, and indeed to commend himself and his ministry. He desperately wants to change the frame of thought of the members of the Christian community in Corinth, so that they think about Christian leadership ... and indeed Christian discipleship ... altogether differently.

When he pleads with them to 'open wide your hearts', I think this can be heard not only as a plea to show him much more generosity of spirit, but also as an invitation to expand their hearts and minds to a broader vision of what it means to follow Jesus and to walk the Christian way.

What he writes by way of commending himself in vv 4-10 can be divided into three sections.

He begins by talking about what his life is immersed in.

In the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta 'The Mikado' there is a song 'I've got a little list'

Well, Paul has a little list!

Each one of them beginning with the word 'in' (these are taken out of the English translations to avoid too much repetition, but it misses something of Paul's intent).

First of all we have a list of the challenges that Paul has met as an apostle.

Endurance
Troubles
Hardships
Distresses
Beatings
Imprisonments
Riots
Hard work
Sleepless nights
Hunger

If what Paul writes were to be read as a CV for a job application it would be quite remarkable ... because he doesn't exactly write himself up. He certainly doesn't come out with a long list of achievements and accomplishments to commend himself. Quite the contrary ... he seems to play on some of those experiences that have brought his credibility into question.

If this were a job application, you would almost think that he doesn't want the job!

Now, I do think that we need to understand what Paul is doing here, because I think he could very easily be misunderstood.

I have been to a number of ministers' meetings in my 37 years of ministry, and on the whole my experience has been pretty good. However, at their worst, they can be pretty dire places ... not least because they tend to be dominated by men. And when men get together, they can get a bit blokish, the testosterone levels can rise, and the competitive spirit takes over. The conversation is never quite as brutal as this, but the sub-text of what is said is this:

- My church is bigger than your church
- I've had more baptisms than you
- I am doing more work in the community than you
- I am more innovative than you

But at other times, the same competitive spirit is at work, the same underlying desire to outdo one another is there, but the tone of the comments shifts:

- I work harder than you
- I am more stressed than you are.
- I have more difficult deacons than you do.
- I work in a tougher situation than you do.

And this kind of one-upmanship is just as unhealthy as the first.

At times in this letter, you could read Paul as if he is entering into just this kind of game-playing ... but I think what Paul is trying to do is something altogether different. He is trying to change the level of discourse - he is trying to break out of this competitive mindset and view his life and the Christian life generally from a different perspective.

He lists all of these, not to say 'I have suffered more than any of your leaders have suffered, therefore I am more qualified to be an apostle.'

I think he is challenging a mindset that assumed that success in ministry – conversions, church growth, miracles, answered prayer – equals signs of union with Christ;

and setbacks in ministry – disagreements, persecution, challenges, suffering – equals signs of disunity with Christ. These things have happened because you have fallen out of step with Christ.

And that is not how Paul views things at all.

This small word 'in' is a big word in Paul's vocabulary. When he wants to sum up what it means to be a follower of Jesus, his favourite phrase is that we are 'in Christ'. The life of the Christian is a life immersed in Christ – immersed in the Christ who died and rose again.

What Paul is saying in effect here, is that this is the day to day reality of being immersed in Christ. When the rubber hits the road being immersed in Christ can take all of these forms – as well as all the other things, it might mean being immersed in

- troubles
- hardships
- distresses
- beatings
- imprisonments
- riots
- hard work
- sleepless nights
- hunger

Because we are immersed as servants in the life of the one came to serve and to suffer.

Of course, there is another side to all of this as well – the Christian life is not unremitting gloom.

Paul has another list!

But when Paul talks about the ‘other side’ of things, these are the things that Paul talks about his life being immersed in –

Purity
Understanding
Patience
Kindness
The Holy Spirit
Sincere love
Truthful speech
The power of God

This isn't a list of achievements – all of these are more to do with ‘character’ than they are to do with accomplishments.

These are nothing to do with what Paul has done ... these are much more about who Paul is ... and in particular they are essentially relationship terms – about how he relates to others and to God

And what is more, by including the Holy Spirit and the power of God, Paul is hinting that this is not so much about what he has done, as about how he lives immersed in the life of God.

And then, we can also say that these characteristics are not characteristics that exemplify what it means to be an apostle, but are characteristics that exemplify what it means to be a follower of Jesus

– they are as applicable to the new convert still growing in her faith as they are to an experienced apostle, establishing churches and teaching the faith.

It's as if Paul is saying – 'Look you might value all sorts of things in your leaders, but when it all boils down to it, these are the essentials for every Christian ... and if these aren't in evidence ... all the bells and whistles will be worthless.

Hadn't Paul said something very similar in his first letter to this church? The beginning of chapter 13:

“If I speak in the tongues of men and angels ... if I have the gift of prophecy ... If I have a faith that can move mountains ... but have not love, I am nothing.”

Then Paul moves on summarising the implications of what the apostle's life, and indeed the Christian's life, is all about.

And guess what?

“I've got a little list”

And this time it's a list where every phrase begins with the word 'through'.

He uses one phrase to highlight the constancy of it and two phrases to highlight the mix of it all.

The constancy:

“weapons of righteousness in the right hand and the left.”

Now, I have to say that I am with a lot of people today who try to avoid using militaristic imagery – it always carries the danger of legitimising the use of violence to solve problems. However, I do wonder whether with Paul there might be a kind of irony in the way he uses these phrases.

I suspect that these macho Corinthian leaders quite liked the use of militaristic imagery, because they probably loved the idea of winning victories, and displaying their power ...

But am I being too generous to Paul to suggest that he is saying ? – ‘Yes, we have powerful weapons, but they are not forceful weapons, they are the weapons of righteousness.’ ... of all that Paul has been talking about being immersed in – peace, understanding, love, truthfulness ...

And by saying that we have these weapons in our right hand and our left, Paul is saying two things.

- on the one hand he is saying that we are fully equipped for everything we face with these weapons – a fully equipped Roman soldier would have a sword in one hand and a shield in the other.
- on the other hand he is saying that these weapons are sufficient ... you haven't got any other hands to hold anything ... This is what we should be concentrating on and focussing on; this is what we should be cultivating ...

If this is the constant in the Christian life, then we also need to be aware of the mix of the Christian life. The implications of being immersed in Christ is that we will live through

- glory and dishonour
- bad report and good report

Because being immersed in Christ is being immersed in the Jesus of Good Friday and of Easter Sunday. His work of love brought liberation and hope through a journey that embraced glory and shame, disrepute and fame ... and he takes us into that same journey.

The implication for apostle and disciple of being immersed in Christ is being immersed into just this same mix – glory and dishonour – because we are both Good Friday people and Easter Sunday people.

And this is where hearts and minds need to be opened wide – to take in both the scandal and the transformation of being followers of Jesus.

And finally Paul addresses something that is close to the heart of the Corinthian leaders – the question of image and appearance. It seems that they are really keen on Christian leaders presenting the right kind of image.

But Paul effectively says that if we are living lives that are truly immersed in Christ, with the implication that we are unconcerned about honour and shame, repute and disrepute ... and only concerned about living in right relationships with God and with one another ... if we are immersed in the life of the shamed and crucified one whom God raised from the dead ... then the whole question about what our lives will look like in the world ... what kind of image we will portray to others in the world is, to say the least, an interesting one.

And certainly nothing like the image that the Corinthian leaders had in mind.

And guess what?

“I’ve got a little list!”

Each of these phrases has the same kind of rhythm and the same format

*“As one thing, yet another thing.”*

(Now, the New International Version does us no favours here, because, for some reason or other the translators have decided to

turn the first two of the phrases the other way round ... and it totally messes up the consistency of the list.)

This might be the image we portray – but this is the underlying reality of our lives.

We will portray a different image, because we don't fit into the normal mould – we are mould-breakers, we are counter-cultural

- Imposters, yet genuine (Genuine, yet regarded as imposters) – our credentials are not the normal credentials for status and significance ... but our credentials come from God and are genuine.
- Unknown, yet known (Known, yet regarded as unknown) – we will be misunderstood because we live by a different story – people won't get us – but when it boils down to it we are known through and through by God ... and that's what matters.
- Dying, yet we live on –
- Beaten, yet not killed – we may look as if we are marked by death, but actually inwardly we are being renewed day by day, and resurrection is at work in us.
- Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing – we will find plenty to fill us with sorrow, because we are concerned, compassionate, on the side of justice in an unjust world ... and yet we are ultimately people of hope who have a deeper inner joy ...
- Poor, yet making many rich – we may not have all of the trimmings of worldly success, but that's not the point ... in Christ we are all about enriching one another and enriching the world in which we live

- Having nothing, yet possessing everything – we may hold lightly to possessions, and some of us will give up everything to follow, but as we walk through this world as children of the Father, everything that is of worth in this world is ours to treasure and to enjoy ...

The image is one thing, but the deeper reality is what counts ...

Paul's appeal to the Corinthians is 'open wide your hearts'.

So open wide your hearts to this counter-cultural, counter-intuitive spirituality ... this way of being with one another, this way of being with God, this way of being at home with ourselves, that may leave us strangely vulnerable in the world, that will leave us content with not fitting into other's norms and values ... but will lead to an altogether richer relationship with God, and a deeper and more rounded way of being human.