

1 Corinthians 16
Be men of courage
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

A few weeks before a general election I thought we'd start with a quotation from the classic BBC comedy Yes Minister.

For those of you who have never sampled this gem of British sitcom the story revolves around moderately competent Government Minister Jim Hacker and his rather manipulative civil servant Sir Humphrey Appleby.

According to Sir Humphrey there are four words that can be used to get a minister to choose the acceptable option (that is the one Humphrey wants!) from a range of policies. These magic words are:

"Simple, quick, popular and cheap."

And there are four words that will make any minister drop a project like a hot porcupine:

"complicated, lengthy, expensive, and controversial."

Or, even better, "courageous." What's the difference?

Well according to Sir Humphrey a controversial policy loses you votes. A courageous one loses you the election.

It's a great line – because we all love the idea that politicians have no courage or convictions – it makes us feel better about ourselves.

But what really is courage? What does it look like to be a courageous person?

Perhaps more importantly for us this morning, what does it look like to be a courageous Christian?

The topic of courage is back on the Christian agenda at the moment, especially perhaps for men, because of the phenomenal success of John Eldredge's book *"Wild at heart."*

I don't know if that's a book any of you have come across at all. I'm sure some people have because it has sold literally millions of copies and been extensively reviewed not only in the Christian press but in the secular media as well, including in *The Times*. The strap-line of the book tells us most of what we need to know about it's topic:

"Discovering the secret of a man's soul."

Essentially Eldredge sets out to show that the church has badly failed men and that this has had a very negative impact on both men and women in our society.

I have no argument with him so far – churches have often failed to understand what it should look like for Christians not only to be believers but also to be male and female and I hope that, here at Christ Church, we don't make that mistake too badly.

But my point of departure from John Eldredge is what he seems to think really is the heart of a man. What really is Christian courage. In his introduction he warns that some people will dismiss his book as "some sort of macho-man pep rally." Which, to be honest, is not surprising because that's exactly what it is! At one point he writes of a hiking expedition he went on with his friend:

"...we hacked our way through grizzly-infested woods in Alaska. The only other guys we met all day were a group of locals on their way out. They looked like something out of Soldier of Fortune magazine – sawed off shotguns, pistols, bandoleers of ammo slung across their chests, huge knives. They were ready. They had what it takes. And we? We had a whistle.... Talk about a couple of pansies."

What Eldredge does in this book, sadly, is not teach us what it means to be courageous Christians, whether we are men or women. Rather he sanctifies and tries to make Christian a particular kind of macho American lifestyle that will never be open to around 6.2 billion of the world's 6.4 billion people.

As one of the most thoughtful reviews of the book that I've seen puts it "Wild at Heart" has three essential problems:

Firstly it badly mishandles Scripture
Secondly its central theme of the book is not consistent with the teaching of the Bible.
And thirdly it has a low, humanistic, and even heretical view of God.

I have a sneaking suspicion that some in the church at Corinth would have been big fans of this book.

Their church too was in danger of being deceived by erroneous teaching that seemed, somehow, more spiritual, that their present experience of the Christian life.

The error they were being taught was clothed in spiritual language. It presented itself as a special Christianity for the keen – those who wanted to move beyond their present experience.

And that's always the way with wrong teaching. As one Christian writer put it nearly 1800 years ago:

"In order not to be discovered error never shows itself in its naked reality. On the contrary, it dresses elegantly, so that the unwary may be led to believe that it is more truthful than truth itself"

The apostle Paul certainly experienced great adventures in his life. He was not by any stretch of the imagination a man who lived tamely or comfortably. But neither was he a man who sought adventure for its own sake or for personal self-indulgence.

So if we want to know what it means to be a courageous Christian, whether we are male or female, we could do much worse than look at 1 Corinthians 16, with its centrepiece command to the Corinthian church: be men of courage.

And what we discover is that Christians are people of courage in at least four areas of their lives:

Christians are people of courage...

a) In giving (1-4)

There are times in life when it's easy to give as tens of billions of pounds for the relief of the victims of Asia's tsunami testify.

I've been to Christian conferences where it's made easy to give as well. They show lots of photos of starving children, play some mournful music and pass the buckets round and they fill up quickly.

But there is another kind of giving which is not so easy. Kind of giving that needs courage. A kind of giving that has no pressure, no gimmickry and no emotionalism. That is the kind of courageous gospel giving that Paul wanted his Corinthian readers to do.

The collection, we know from elsewhere in the New Testament, was for the hungry – specifically for hungry Christians in and around Jerusalem. But Paul doesn't labour that point here.

Instead he gives them simply, matter of fact instructions about that they are to do with their giving:

On the first day, that is Sunday, of every week, each person in the church is to put aside a sum of money "as he may prosper" – in other words according to what he can afford that week (almost no-one in Corinth would have had a regular monthly income as we understand it). They are to save the money up at home (not, notice, put it in a plate at church!) until Paul came and would send some representatives from the church to Jerusalem to actually carry the money.

This, one presumes, was in addition to whatever money the Corinthians were already giving to support the work of their own local church.

But why should I describe giving like this as courageous? Surely it's actually rather ordinary and hum-drum?

Well I don't think so. From what they had today the Corinthians were to set aside what they could for others.

Most of them would have had no idea what they would have next week. Many of them would not have been in any position to save. Remember this is a church composed mostly of the poor and despised of society. Soberly setting aside money each week was an act of courage because it was an expression of confidence in God's sovereignty over their lives.

We'll be having a specific church gift day in a month or so, appropriately, perhaps, on our first Sunday in our new bigger venue at Archbishop Blanch school up the road. So I don't want to harp on about this too much now.

But it is in the passage; so the question for us is are we courageous in our giving?

Generously and soberly setting aside each week or month what we can give may not have the glamour of the wilderness about it. But it is an act of Christian courage because it expresses our concern for evangelism, our love for other Christians and the value we attach to God and his gospel. Perhaps more than any of those things though responsible, careful, regular Christian giving is courageous because it is an expression of our trust in God's provision regardless of how we feel about God.

Gospel people have courage in giving. Second gospel people have courage...

b) In recognising gospel ministers (5-12 & 15-18)

It would have been easy for some in the church in Corinth to have been unimpressed that, given all the serious issues going around in their church, Paul was even sending this letter rather than coming in person to sort the issues out.

It would have been easy for others in the church opposed to Paul's line on this or that issue to despise Timothy – or to treat him as nothing more than Paul's youthful sidekick – the Tonto to his Lone Ranger.

It would have been easy to be disappointed that Apollos, such a popular figure among some sections of the church, had decided not to come back to them, at least not immediately.

It would have been easy, if you found some parts of Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians difficult to accept, to take that out on the messengers – Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus.

Paul deals with all those people and possibilities in these verses.

And, essentially, his appeal to the Corinthians is that, if they are genuinely committed to the Lord Jesus Christ, they should recognise the gospel ministry that these people have and work with them not against them.

Paul, v9, wants them to understand that he is not coming from Ephesus because there is evangelism to be done there – and that, for the moment, must be his priority.

He wants them, v11, to accept Timothy as they would him and acknowledge him as a man working for the glory of Christ.

Paul longs for the Corinthians to see that Apollos is staying with him not because of some plot on Paul's part to separate this popular preacher from the church but because Apollos himself feels it would be best for him to wait a while. It may well be, of course, that the reason Apollos felt this was that he recognised the danger that, as a man supported strongly by one faction in the church, his presence could make things worse instead of better.

And Paul desires the Corinthians to submit to and recognise people like Stephanas, v16 and v18.

In other words he wants the Corinthians to see beyond the issues of preference and personality. He wants them to look past previous hurts and difficulties. He wants them to recognise that the priorities of the people they need to look to in their church family should be gospel priorities. That the people they should respect are not always going to do what suits them – they are going to do what is best for the cause of Christ.

It's often said that it requires courage to be a leader. And that's certainly true. But it also requires great courage to submit to others.

We have no idea whether Stephanas and his friends were recognised "elders" in the church or indeed whether they had any formal leadership role. But Paul, Apollos and Timothy certainly did. And Paul wants the Corinthians to look for gospel minded people and then submit and recognise them. And that was not easy in Corinth. And it is not easy to recognise gospel ministers today either.

There are times in every church family, there will be times in our church family, when it will require courage on your part to recognise the leadership of the church elders. Maybe we will in some way disappoint your expectations for what we believe to be the right priority for the gospel. Maybe, for example, you would have preferred not to move to Archbishop Blanch school for our meetings. It will need courage on your part to move on from that.

Paul is not asking the Corinthians to blindly follow their leader. Nor is he suggesting that he, Timothy, Apollos and all the rest of them never get it wrong.

What he is asking local church members to do is to recognise gospel minded people among them and run with them, even though sometimes that journey can be costly.

Gospel people have courage in giving. Gospel people have courage in recognising and following gospel ministers. Thirdly gospel people show courage...

c) In love for others (14, 19-20 & 24)

As you'll know only too well if you've been following our series in 1 Corinthians over the last 9 months (scary isn't it!) one of the great problems in the church family at Corinth was their lack of love.

This expressed itself mostly in claims of superiority. The Corinthians thought they were better.

Better than some of the other people in their church – so Paul tells them, v14, to do everything in love.

Better than other churches – so Paul makes sure he sends Christian greetings from, v19, all the churches in the province of Asia and especially from Aquila and Priscilla who had previously been residents of Corinth.

They thought they were better than Paul – so he makes sure, v24, that right at the end of this sometimes heated letter where he has had to rebuke them over many issues he sends them his love.

That must have taken some courage for Paul. Because loving other Christians is a courageous thing to do.

In fact sacrificing your own interest for the good of other believers, and doing it with joy and gladness, which is the essence of love, makes bungee jumping, white water rafting, skydiving and ice climbing look like picnics in the park.

Loving others often has little or no reward in this life. Loving others is a statement of faith in God's promises for eternity. It is a declaration that we are living for the future. An announcement that it is God's verdict on our life that matters.

It is hard to respond in love. This week at a conference I was at somebody said some unpleasant and untrue things about me to somebody else. And how did I respond?

Well I failed. When I found out I reacted with a first instinct not to love the person who had wronged me but to clear my name and come out of the situation looking good. In Paul's terms I bottled it. Because the courageous Christian should do everything in love.

Fortunately God is a God of grace and forgiveness and mercy and my standing with him is not dependent on me being courageous but his righteousness which is given to be through what Jesus Christ did on the cross.

So my failure to love does not affect my salvation – and a good job too or all of us would be stuffed.

But the right response to what Jesus has done, the thing I ought to have done, is not self-defence but love. The courageous Christian shows love for others.

Doing everything in love means learning to respond completely differently to the rest of the world when we are hurt or offended.

This week someone is bound to do something unpleasant to you – will you respond in a way consistent with Christian courage?

It means being thankful for the distinctives of our local church but recognising our partnership with all gospel centred, Bible teaching people in the world, even when we disagree with them about all sorts of other issues.

Finally gospel people show courage...

d) In holding to the gospel (13 & 22-23)

Both in the centre of this chapter and right at the end Paul's heartfelt plea to the Corinthian Christians is that they don't drift away from the message that he brought to them about Jesus.

Not only must they love other but, v22, they must love the Lord.

And what that means is that they must be on their guard, v13. They must stand firm in the faith. They must be strong.

Paul uses the word "faith" in two different ways in his letters. One way is to talk about that act of believing or trusting. If we have faith in God it means that we trust him and take him at his word. But here Paul is using "faith" in a different sense. "The faith" is the message about God that we need to believe. You could say that we need to have faith in the faith. The faith is the body of Christian teaching that the Corinthians have received from Paul – the set of truths about God and Christ that we have received in the Bible.

Maybe you've never thought that it is an act of courage simply to stay Christian. But it is.

There are endless pressures, forces and people out there who would love you to stop being Christian. Not to stop being a churchgoer. Or necessarily to become a hard line atheist of anything. But just not to stand on the gospel.

- Not to say that Jesus Christ is the only person who can reconcile us to God.
- Not to be strong in saying that adultery, abortion, euthanasia, greed and envy are always wrong.

- Not to be clear that only a church ruled by the teachings of the Bible, and not by tradition, experience or human reason, is a true church.

Remaining Christian in a godless world requires backbone. Not macho bravado. It's not something just for men.

And it's not meant to make us hard or unapproachable. Can I say on behalf of the elders of CCL that I hope we are all approachable, gentle, kind people. I hope you feel that whatever your struggles in the Christian life you can come to any of us and talk about them. If ever given the impression that that is not the case I'm very sorry about that.

And ultimately this is not a courage that we somehow find within ourselves – we're not, as the song says, searching for the hero inside ourselves, which is what *Wild at Heart* wants us to do.

No the courage to stand as a Christian is found in the Christian message itself. Because it is a message about Jesus that comes with the very the very power of Christ.

We saw that in chapter 15 didn't we. It is because the message is a message of a future resurrection and hope that we know that our labour in the Lord is not in vain.

And it is because we know that nothing done for the gospel is wasted that we can have courage.

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