

2 Corinthians 4:1-18

The future's bright... The future's glorious/eternal/orange!

Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Why do we bother? With church. With all this. I mean it's not exactly packed in here is it? I meet people all the time who, when you tell them that Christ Church Liverpool started with about 15 people 5 years ago and that there are now, what, 170 of us think it's amazing.

I have to say that the lack of ambition of such people disappoints me. 10 years ago Google consisted of two blokes with a personal computer each. Now it is a company worth something well over \$100 billion.

Now I'm not saying that we should be Google. But what we have – a message that is about forgiveness of sin by your creator, about restored relationships with other people, about the guaranteed end of disease, pain, suffering and death, is, surely, on any reckoning, better than an internet search engine – however many hits it can find you for porn, gambling, cheap books or whatever your particular thing is.

We have the best message in the world. Really the only piece of good news in a world that is otherwise destined only for death.

And yet we can't even fill a medium sized school hall. If you added together all the meetings of people who describe themselves as Christian churches of any variety there wouldn't be as many of them in this city on a Sunday as there are filling Anfield football ground every time Liverpool play – and we're not charging £45 a ticket!

And it's such blooming hard work. There were people here first thing this morning, putting out chairs, putting up banners, plugging in PA and video, making coffee. Such an effort.

And for what? For maybe 0.5% of the people who live round here to come along. Why do we bother? Why don't we just give it all up as a bad job and go home? Or at least change tack and try another approach. Because this one doesn't seem to be working all that spectacularly.

This whole thing about being a Bible teaching church. A place where we are constantly looking into the Scriptures to see what they say. Where we are conforming our songs to the words and concepts of an ancient book. Where we try to face up to both the philosophically difficult and the personally challenging parts of the Bible.

Why bother? From my point of view, as someone who works full-time for the church, there are seriously easier ways to earn a lot more money. From the point of view of those of you who don't work for the church there are a lot of other things you could choose to do in your leisure time. Why do we bother?

Well the apostle Paul, nearly 2,000 years ago, faced exactly the same kinds of issues. Last week we saw in chapter 3 how Paul defended the Christian message. He said that the good news about Jesus was much more glorious and wonderful than the law of Moses that the Jews had followed for centuries – a law best known to us for its summary in the so-called "10 commandments".

Well that might be. But if it really was so much more wonderful why was the synagogue fuller than the churches? Why was Judaism a respectable tolerated religion in the Roman Empire and the Christianity a despised and persecuted sect?

Or, to put it in contemporary terms, if Christianity is so fantastic why are the churches empty and the shopping centres full? Shouldn't such a situation be profoundly depressing for every Christian and, especially, for the preacher of the Christian message?

Well Paul's answer, as you'll have guessed, is no. No it shouldn't be depressing. No the lack of popularity of the Christian message shouldn't lead us to give up. No we should not, as Paul puts it at the beginning and the end of chapter 4, lose heart. Why not? Well for three reasons. Plain preaching Christians don't lose heart because...

1 Straight talking is all that works (v1-6)

Throughout history there have always been speakers who can draw a crowd. People who can persuade others to join in some scheme or other.

From people promising spiritual enlightenment on payment of a large cheque to people who sell hundreds of thousands of books on "how to seduce women" or "how to make a fortune in property".

The methods may be different but in every age there have been hucksters and charlatans who use the power of personality, their command of the spoken word, and the promises of wealth, lust and power to

entrap the unwary.

Our church could be full – if we tapped into the desires of our time and managed to do a reasonable job of persuading people we could give them what they want.

If we covered up the limitations and spun the best line we could our gospel could be popular. Just like Paul's could have been.

But Paul was not willing to compromise on his message, or his methods, to fill the stadiums. He has, he writes, renounced secret and shameful ways. He refuses to deceive people and he will not distort the word of God. For Paul the message of the Scriptures is binding – and he will not quote it selectively to make people feel comfortable.

Instead, he says, he sets forth the truth plainly. Paul is a straight talker. Nothing difficult gets missed out. Nothing awkward is brushed under the carpet. The message that God has given him is the message he gives.

That, Paul says, is undeniable. He commends himself to every man's conscience. Every person who hears Paul's message, even if they reject it, has to acknowledge that he has set it forth plainly, simply and without smoke and mirrors.

Of course it's all very well to say that you speak plainly. But hang on a minute Paul. If what you are saying is really so plain and obvious AND it's such great news how come there are so many who don't believe it?

In chapter 3 Paul outrageously claimed that the Jewish people didn't, in fact, couldn't, understand their own Scriptures because whenever Moses was read the meaning was veiled, hidden from them.

The gospel message, by contrast, was unveiled. Plain. Clear. Visible. Revealed. But if that's so how come so many people don't believe? Perhaps this strategy of unvarnished plain speaking isn't the right one after all?

Well the problem isn't with the message about Jesus. And it's not with Paul the messenger either. The problem is with the people the message is being proclaimed to. "The god of this age," Paul writes in v4, "has blinded the minds of unbelievers so they cannot see." People have variously understood the "god of this age" in that verse to refer to the one true God, the Lord or to the evil one – Satan. But the Bible never refers to Satan as a "god" anywhere else; other than in

highly sarcastic terms. So if the "god" isn't "The Lord" and it isn't "the devil" who is it? Well the god of this age IS this age. That is people's God isn't it? What do people worship that blinds them to the truth about Jesus? This life. We worship sunbathers and shopping and sex. We worship now. We give ourselves in totality to this this life. To today.

Now of course there are plenty of places you can go in the Bible to see that both God and Satan have an active role to play in people's unbelief. But I think what Paul wants to draw our attention to here is that the thing that stops people seeing the truth of the gospel, the good news about Jesus, is their total focus on here and now.

And that focus means that two things are necessary. One, obviously, is plain speaking. Clear, obvious explanation of the truth is going to be required if people are so obsessed with now that they can't lift their eyes to the horizon of eternity. But the other requirement is an intervention of God himself. If the gospel message is that Jesus Christ is Lord then it must be God himself who demonstrates this to be true by shining a bright light in the darkest place in the universe – the human heart.

Paul is probably thinking, as he writes these words, back to his own conversion as he headed off to Damascus to kill some Christians. His encounter with the risen Christ on the road left him physically blind for a time but enlightened in his heart.

People today often set the plain speaking of the gospel against the powerful work of God in bringing new life to people as they believe in Jesus. The spiritual work of God, they argue, is mystical and mysterious. It needs to be brought about in an atmosphere that seems appropriately spiritual – of labyrinths, mature sounds, twilight and meditation. Preaching, they say, is too cerebral, intellectual and logical. It is more human than divine. More university than universal. More traditional than transformational. If we want to see many saved, the argument goes, many turning to Christ and receiving powerful new life, we must turn from this insistence on setting forth the truth plainly and embrace a more spiritual methodology.

But Paul will not have that. It is through the open statement of the truth, he insists that the miraculous power of God works. Just as God spoke and light came into being so it is as people speak that God enlightens people's hearts about Jesus.

Let me be frank. One of the reasons it's not easy being involved in our church is because there are lots of

people out there, and quite a lot of Christians, who are opposed to our methodology of plain speaking. Who do not believe that the explanation of the Bible bit by bit is the means by which God brings people to the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ. So if you come here you will be probably be said by at least some other people to be cerebral and left brained and all the rest of it. Now I don't want to defend everything about Christ Church – I can give you a very long catalogue of the things that are wrong with our church if you want me to.

But one of them is not that we set forth the truth plainly. Sometimes, I suspect, we are not plain enough. Not that we should be simplistic. But that it is always right to want to state the truth about God and his plans in the clearest, most comprehensive, most thoughtful, most well put way that we can. Because it is as the word is spoken that the light comes.

Straight talking is all that works.

2 Hard lives prove Jesus' power (v7-12)

Of course Paul's problems didn't end with the fact that many people chose to reject the message of Christ. After all many people have rejected the chief executives of the world's biggest banks but they will still retire in comfort to their gated mansions.

For Paul however a lack of impressive conversion rates was accompanied by a life of significant hardship. He not only experienced shipwreck, beatings and ill health but felt himself to be struggling – hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted and struck down as he puts it in v8-9.

You can just imagine people saying that they could understand why those blinded by total their commitment to this life might not find great wonder in the message about Jesus. But that wouldn't explain why those who did believe his message – and especially Paul, who saw himself as specially chosen to spread that message – should have such a rubbish life. If the truth about Jesus is so wonderful why should a life lived pursuing and sharing that truth be so terrible?

The reason, Paul says, is because the message is about Jesus not about him. The treasure, the precious and powerful thing is not the vessel. The treasure is not the messenger, but the message. And the casket needs to be fragile and common so that the cargo can be seen for the priceless jewel it is.

It is only because the gospel minister is of

comparatively little value and power that the treasure and glory of the message about Jesus can be seen clearly.

This, of course is the problem with our idea that if only some celebrities became Christians suddenly lots of people would be converted. But the power somebody has as a celebrity is inevitably the opposite of the power they have as a Christian. The people of the world adore and want to emulate the lives of people that they think are not common, not earthenware vessels. So if a famous person gets converted and is honest and upfront in portraying themselves with their flaws and weaknesses as a jar of clay they will lose the very "star quality" that makes other people want to copy them. For it is not celebrity lives that prove the power of the gospel but hard lives. Lives like Paul's.

His was a life that carried the death of Jesus with him, v10. That's not saying he had some morbid streak and was always going on about death. But the things that happened to Paul were death like. He was constantly exposing himself to hardship, risk and danger that reflected the death of Jesus.

He described himself as always being given over to death for Jesus sake. That shows, I think, that Paul isn't just thinking of the death of Jesus as the single moment in history when Jesus stopped breathing on that Roman cross. His death was the whole experience of betrayal, beating, unjust trial, accusations, slapping, being crowned with thorns, abused, carrying the cross and left to die in agony in the Palestinian sun.

Paul's experiences were not as extreme as that – though they weren't far off! But he still sees them as reflecting something of the death of Jesus.

He carries the death of Jesus round with him so that the life of Jesus can also be seen in him. Because Paul's life is so obviously hard there's no way that he would continue ministering if there wasn't a precious message, a divine power of life at work in him keeping him going.

Paul's suffering is the suffering of the minister. It is suffering that he endures so that, v12, life can be at work in the Corinthians. In his evangelism Paul put up with the beatings, the soakings, the blisters and the arrests so that life could come to men and women in the churches he founded.

We, thankfully, are not apostles. So we are not necessarily called upon by Christ to prove his power through a suffering life in exactly the same way that

3 Future glory awaits (v13-18)

Paul was. But the principle remains the same for us as it was for Paul. The life and power and preciousness of the good news about Jesus is seen when gospel ministers suffer. When it is costly to us to be and live as a Christian.

Let me give you an example from this week. I was chatting to someone who was telling me about an acquaintance who had chosen to give up leading a small group Bible study because, basically, they could not be bothered and it was all just a bit too much effort. Let me ask you a question about that person. Will their non-Christian friends, or even their Christian friends, be looking at that person and saying "You know X. He's carrying the death of Jesus round in his body." His Christian life is really hard work. He really puts everything into serving Jesus, even when it costs him. Of course they won't. They'll think that guy makes decisions on exactly the same basis they do – whether they can be bothered. And if they can't see the death of Jesus they're not going to see the life of Jesus either.

I've been going to the gym quite a bit recently. And I can tell you that there are guys in there who give a lot more time and effort to their muscles than I do to reading my Bible and saying my prayers. Some of those guys suffer to look really ripped. And I have something a trillion times better to offer the world than massive biceps – the good news of eternal life. But people won't see the life if I don't carry any death round with me. Because it is hard lives that prove Jesus' power.

Some of you here, I know, want to go into full-time vocational Christian ministry and work in a church or Christian organization. Can I say to you that this truth is intended by Paul to apply particularly to Christian leaders and pastors. So do not apply to be a Ministry Trainee at Christ Church unless you are prepared to work really hard. Do not come to me and ask about going to theological college unless you are willing to stay up as late as it takes to write a sermon or visit someone in a crisis. Don't preach unless you're prepared to take on graciously the person who cannot bear what you have to say and defend the teachings of the Bible. Don't stand up and tell people how to live by God's grace unless you are content for them to know that you are a desperate sinner who struggles with laziness, lust, greed and worry and who needs to know God's grace just to get you through the day.

Only clay people can be preachers. Hard lives prove Jesus' power. Finally plain preaching Christians don't lose heart because...

A thousand years before Paul wrote the Psalmist, in the midst of great personal suffering, noted that the inevitable effect of true faith in the God of the Bible was to speak about him: "I believed – and so I spoke."

Paul did the same. But he had an even clearer knowledge than the Psalmist that he could speak with confidence knowing that one day the life of Jesus that had begun to be seen as he ministered in the midst of suffering would come to fullness. Paul knew that the power of God who raised the Lord Jesus hadn't worked as a one off in the resurrection of Christ. Instead Christ was simply the firstfruits. The early demonstration of what will happen to every believer at the last day.

Why do we bother? Why do we keep going with all this when it would be so much easier to do something else? Well surely, in the end, it must be because being a Christian and living like a Christian doing the things God asks us to do, is the best thing in the world.

It results in glory. It leads to eternal life. It takes us into the very presence of God himself. We'll learn a lot more about what happens when we die in chapter 5 in two weeks time. But even before we get into that it's patently clear what Paul's saying here isn't it?

We don't lose heart because in the end it's all worth while. It is worth persevering with the Christian life and Christian ministry because somehow the affliction results in glory.

That doesn't mean that glory is a reward to suffering in the Christian life. It is not that great suffering as a Christian earns you glory from God. And in any case the glory that is given is out of all proportion, Paul says, to the suffering endured so that nobody could think they had deserved it.

But there is, Paul insists, a connection between living wholeheartedly as a Christian now and taking the suffering on the chin, as it were, and the glory there will be later.

"This light and momentary affliction *is preparing for us* an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison."

Why do we bother? Because it's good for us! Because it leads to glory that is infinitely more wonderful than whatever suffering we might have to endure now.

As C S Lewis put it in his famous sermon, The Weight of Glory, with its title taken from this passage: "When

all the suns and nebulae have passed away, each one of you will still be alive.”

We cannot see that eternity. Not because it isn't real – it is more real that you can possibly imagine. But simply because it isn't here yet. The world around us, in all its vivid colours, is merely transitory. It is a beautiful world. It is a worthwhile world. A world to be enjoyed and appreciated. But not a world to be focussed on. It's worth looking at. It's a delightful world to be in much of the time. But it is only temporary.

So, if we would do the kind of death filled ministry that Paul did, we must look to that which is certain but yet unseen. We must fix our eyes on the glory that awaits. And doing so will change our lives in astonishing ways.

Many of you here this morning will never go into full-time vocational preaching ministry. And that's a good thing. Because the normal pattern for most Christians through most of history is to have regular jobs, raise families, be part of a local church and speak plainly about Jesus to the people you meet.

But let's be honest. For some of you your colleagues don't even know you are a Christian. Why is that? And for others they know you're a Christian but they have no idea what that means because you've never told them. Why is that? And for many more, I know, they simply don't know anything about you because you never go for a drink with them after work, you never invite them out for lunch or over to your house for dinner or go to the football for the cinema or a concert or the gym with them. Why is that?

Well I'm sure there are all sorts of reasons. And believe me I know that it's difficult. But perhaps one of the reasons we don't do those things, why we don't even make time for our colleagues, is that we have believed one of the biggest lies of our culture. What lie is that?

The lie that our time is precious.

That is not true. At least not in the sense our culture means it. We buy the line that we must have plenty of me time. Time to do what I want. Time for my friends and family. Time for shopping and leisure and cinema and TV and books and holidays and all the rest of it. Now I don't want to despise any of those things. Because this is a good world that God has made for us to enjoy. And we should enjoy it.

But I want to say that your time is not precious for

you. Because you have all eternity to enjoy. You have an eternal weight of glory to look forward to. Your friends think they have 70 years and then that's it. You know that's not true. So you don't need to be precious about your time. Because you have plenty of it to give away in the service of others.

Why don't my non-Christian friends come to church more often? Why don't I tell them the gospel as much as I'd like to in my best moments? Because I think I'm too busy. I think my time is precious to me. But it isn't – because I have all eternity. So I can afford to give them my time now. And they need it – because they are dying without Jesus.

Do not lose heart. Genuine Christian ministry, straight talking to people about the words of Jesus, is tough. But don't be discouraged. Because plain speaking is all that works, hard lives prove Jesus power and, most of all, future glory awaits.

Meanwhile, as C S Lewis said, the cross comes before the crown and tomorrow is a Monday morning. A cleft has opened in the pitiless walls of the world, and we are invited to follow our great Captain inside.

Will we follow Jesus and his servant Paul? Will we fix our eyes on glory so that, however afflicted, perplexed, persecuted and struck down we may be, we will know in our hearts that we cannot be crushed, driven to despair, forsaken or destroyed?

Will we be plain preaching Christians who do not lose heart?

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