

**Sunday 8 March 2020**

*A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Second Sunday of Lent.*

**Readings:** 2 Corinthians 3.1-3, 12-18

'Too much learning is driving you insane, Paul', the Roman proconsul Festus told our patron saint during his trial directions-hearing in the capital of the Roman province Judea, in fact 'you are out of your mind!' (Acts 26.24). To which Paul responded, 'I am not out of my mind, but speaking the sober truth'. And proceeded to open the mind of two men who presided over his trial to the message of Jesus Christ. The vassal king of Judea, Agrippa, was the first to suspect that Paul's sharing his learning was not an effort on Paul's part to mount a legal defence, but rather an effort to convert the two rulers to the faith he had received. 'I stand here testifying to both small and great ... that the Messiah must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to the Jews and the Gentiles'.

In setting out the story of how he came to be a believer, Paul sought to open the minds of others to the truth of his beliefs. Paul's fervour led the Jewish vassal king to question Paul directly about his intentions: 'Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?' Agrippa asked. To which Paul replied: 'Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains' (Acts 26.29). It did not matter whether he was chained in a courtroom or debating philosophers in the market square, Paul was ready to share his own faith with others, in order to ensure that they, too, might come to share the light of faith that had so radically transformed his own life.

Paul's diligence in making known the message that God seeks people from all kinds of backgrounds to come to know him, and to experience the power of lives renewed through faith, comes from his own conversion, he admits when questioned in court. He tells Festus and Agrippa how it was when travelling in pursuit of the followers of Jesus that he was stopped in his tracks by a vision of Jesus as a blazing light: 'At midday, your excellency, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining on me', Paul testifies.

That blinding light, Paul knew, was the risen Lord Jesus who now commissioned him to open the minds and eyes of non-Jewish people, the Gentiles, 'so that they may turn from darkness to light'. His own testimony had been as transparent as his light-filled conversion: none of his debates or discussions were ever held in secret: 'I speak freely ... nothing is done in a corner', Paul affirmed in court. By being open about his intentions to bring others to faith, Paul later on is able to open the minds even of his prison warders in Rome to the beliefs he holds. And that is an important message for us to hear, as we think about how we might enable others to share in the faith we hold ourselves.

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Sharing faith is personal and direct. It is a matter of personal conviction just as it is a matter of establishing personal relationships. It is a matter of being transparent about the reasons for building and nurturing such relationships: Paul is passionate about others because he is passionate about faith, and he readily tells any he meets that this is so. In our epistle reading,

Paul tells the Corinthians that they are so closely linked to him and he to them that it is as if they were 'a letter written on our hearts, to be known and read by all'.

In his own earlier persecution of the disciples of Jesus, Paul had furnished himself with letters of introduction to all the synagogues on the way to Damascus. He set out on his hate-filled mission to eradicate Christians by presenting 'authority received from the Chief Priests'. Now he tells the Corinthians that it is their personal relationship to one another that commends him to them, and them to him: 'surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation?' In order to recommend the faith to others, Paul tells, we first need to be in relationship with one another. In the same way in which Paul carries those to whom he speaks in his heart, so we too can carry those whom we seek to bring to Christ in our own hearts.

Establishing such a profound connection, Paul believes firmly, is the work of God's Holy Spirit. It is the 'Spirit of the Living God' that inscribes the words of introduction into the hearts of those whom he sends to share the good news. Just as it is the same Spirit who opens the minds of those who receive the bearer of that good news. People come to faith because God's Spirit opens the minds, and dwells in their hearts, Paul affirms. None of the work of sharing the good news is ever our own. It is the work of the Spirit of the Living God. The same Spirit that opened the minds of the Corinthians to receive Paul's message also worked in Paul's heart. This is why the people he called and brought to faith are as it were anchored in his own heart: 'you yourself are our letter'.

'You are written in my heart', Paul here tells the people in Corinth. You are engraved in my heart as profoundly and as lastingly as any inscription carved in stone. You are engraved by the Spirit of the living God on tablets of human hearts. What a connection between the bearer and the recipient of God's good news! Heart talks to heart when the message of Christ is shared, which is why bringing people to discipleship is so deeply personal and we must be absolutely transparent about our own intentions. We cannot bring people to Christ by deceit, by feigning friendship or attention. We must become true friends, be truly attentive and then pray for the Spirit of God to work in our hearts and in the hearts of our non-Christian friends. Sharing the good news is the work of God's Spirit in human lives, Paul knows. And that work is best seen when we bring God's love to the world.

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Opening the minds of others to the good news, first requires us to become so attuned to that good news that we carry it in our own hearts, Paul tells us. The good news that Jesus transforms lives is best shared when it is both written in our hearts and shown forth in our lives. In order to highlight how much more personal, how much more immediate the influence of God's Holy Spirit is on our lives, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the covenant God made with his people at Sinai. On Mount Sinai only one person, Moses, spoke with God face to face. Over forty days Moses conversed with God, was given God's wisdom and commandments. The words he was given, he engraved on tablets of stone.

Because he had stood in the radiance of God's light for forty days, Moses veiled his face, which continued to shine with heavenly brightness. Moses had to shield God's people from this glory by wearing a veil: 'he placed a veil over his face so that the children of Israel would not look

intently into the end of that fading glory', the Greek reads. Moses' face did not shine forever with God's glory: what remained when the light of the glory of God had faded, were only the words engraved in stone tablets. And 'the minds of the people became as hardened as the stone tablets', Paul quipped. Because the letters the people read were not engraved in their hearts but on stone tablets, their faith remained external, Paul suggests here. The veil that was a reminder of the fading glory of a distant God is set aside in Christ, Paul now tells, because when we turn to Christ we are given the Spirit of God to dwell in our hearts. Having God's Spirit dwell in our hearts is what makes faith so personal, he tells the Corinthians.

The story of the people of Israel on their forty-year journey across the deserts to the Land of Promise shows how quickly Moses' stone tablets were broken: in fact even as Moses still descends from the mountain, the people created for themselves a god they could see and touch—a golden calf. The tablets lasted only as long as the journey from the mountain-top, because the people's hearts had already been hardened. Paul tells the Jewish Christians in Corinth that their own faith should be radically different from that of their forebears: where their forebears read God's law and sought to comprehend it, they themselves are guided by God's Holy Spirit. The stone tablets only led to hardened hearts, Paul tells them: only the living letters of the Spirit engraved on human hearts lead to living faith. 'Now the Lord is the Spirit', Paul affirms, 'and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom'. When we turn to Christ, our minds may be opened to the reality and presence of God; may encounter him directly as a liberating, transforming, constant presence in our lives.

The message of Christ, Paul tells the people of Corinth, leads to an encounter with God that is far more intimate, far more profound than even Moses' forty-day stay in God's presence on Mount Sinai. That glory might have set Moses' face ablaze with light for a period, but the light of Christ can illumine human hearts for ever. For here God reveals himself not only to one human being, who speaks of his experience of encountering God in a rare mountain-top experience, but God reveals himself to all human beings. More so: God not only reveals himself to all, but seeks to dwell in all believers.

The indwelling of God in human hearts sets free and transforms the entirety of all human living when we turn to Christ: 'all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed'. We are transformed into who we truly are: people who are made in God's image, people who reflect God's image to the world, people who carry God in our hearts, people who carry God's people in our hearts. And this work of transformation is ongoing and ever evolving: 'from one degree of glory to another we are being transformed more and more into the image of God'.

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What does that mean for us at St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne?

- How do we reflect God to others? How do we make sure that what we do and speak reflects the vision that God has for this world, and for each individual to flourish and grow? Are there habits you may want to take up (or lay down) in order to be more generous, more loving, more kind and gracious to others? Pray about how you might mirror God's love to you in your own love of others.

- How do we carry ourselves before God, and how do we carry others in our hearts? How do we ensure that our lives of faith are nurtured and resourced? Are we open to God's presence in our lives and do we spend sufficient time with God, by prayer, the study of the Scriptures, and the Sacrament? Do we care sufficiently for ourselves so that we can be enabled better to care for others? Pray that you may be given open hearts to bring people before God in prayer.
- How do we become a letter of Christ? How do we make sure that nothing we do is done 'in a corner', that our interactions are transparent and clear, that our faith is open, inviting and inclusive? How can we become the letter that Paul wrote, and share in his work as an apostle? Are there things we need to learn or reflect on, in order to be more confident in our ability to bring the good news to others? Pray that you may be given an open mind as you share your faith with others.

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We are to be the letters that Christ writes in the hearts of the world. It is in his letter to the Romans that Paul tells us how each of us can share in "delivering" the letters of Christ to the world. Paul knows that it is when we believe in our hearts we are made right with God, and when we confess him with our testimony we are saved. The lifegiving knowledge that all who call on God shall be made right and be saved will only benefit few people, Paul tells the Romans, unless we ourselves make it known: 'how are people to call on one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?' (Romans 10.14). When we reflect God to others, we make known his goodness and grace. When we carry others in our hearts, we make known the love and power of God in our own lives. When we become letters of Christ, that goodness and grace, love and power, may be known and read and heard by all.

'Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ', Paul tells the Romans (Romans 10.17). 'You are a letter of Christ, written by the Spirit of the living God on tablets of human hearts', he tells the Corinthians. 'Since we have such a hope, act with great boldness', he tells them and us, 'for the love of Christ urges us on'.

And today, in his love, Christ invites us to open our hearts to his letter, and invites us to receive his Spirit so that we may be sent to those who have yet to hear and believe in him: a letter of grace and peace, love and compassion written on and through our own hearts.

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.