

A question of yokes

A Sermon on 2 Corinthians 6:3-7:1

When he first came to them, Jesus had spoken to him in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid,’ Jesus had said. ‘Keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.’

He held on to those words. He needed to: cast out of the synagogue, brought before the proconsul, Gallio, he was, as always, the embattled apostle. But God raised up key leaders for the young church during Paul’s stay in their midst: Crispus, the synagogue leader, the missionaries Aquila and Priscilla, and Apollos, the preacher.

But now it seemed that everything was beginning to unravel, was perhaps, even now, lost. In fear of his life in Asia, Paul received a report from Corinth which agitated him. He wrote the Corinthians a long letter. The troubles abated, then flared up once more. He made a visit, a painful one. He told them he would return shortly, then changed his mind. They retaliated by calling him inconsistent, unreliable.

And now he sat down to write to them again, penning the long, tortured defence of his ministry we have in our Bibles as Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians. In doing so he turned himself inside-out, and thus gave us one of the most complex and satisfying self-portraits in all the literature of Antiquity.

But Paul never tells us about himself purely for the sake of unburdening himself, or even justifying himself, as real an objective as this is in this letter. He is always trying to model what a life of obedience to Jesus his Saviour might look like for the benefit of those to whom he writes. And this is what gives Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians its distinctive twofold nature: on the one hand, it is an impassioned, deeply personal defence of Paul’s character and work in response to sustained criticism. But on the other, it’s a blueprint for anyone wanting to learn how to live well as a follower of Jesus during times of suffering and discouragement.

We’re taking up our series in 2 Corinthians again in verse 3 of chapter 6 after Paul’s famous characterisation of his missionary work as an embassy from God, announcing to the whole world that in Jesus’ life and death God has been reconciling people to himself. Our passage this morning follows on from this with two important corollaries for how Paul – and, implicitly, any

Christian – ought to live *as* Christ’s ambassadors, that is, as someone who, however imperfectly, represents God in sharing with others the good news about Jesus’ death on their behalf.

The first implication will occupy us in part one of this sermon, and it can be put quite simply, both negatively and positively. Paul is saying that people engaged in sharing God’s good news with others will be careful to let nothing get in the way of people coming to know and accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. The second part of this morning’s sermon will take up the second of Paul’s corollaries, and it can be put this way: accepting Jesus as your Lord and Saviour will inevitably mean parting company with other claimants for those positions. Jesus wants all of us, not just some of us. In fact, we could summarise the two corollaries, or implications, in this way: firstly, faithful ambassadors will do whatever they can to help others understand and accept the message with which they’ve been entrusted, and secondly, faithful ambassadors are not double agents: they represent one government only.

Let’s dive in! —

PART ONE

Put no stumbling block in anyone’s path’

Our passage begins with one very long sentence, stretching all the way from verse 3 to verse 11 in the original Greek. It’s very long, because it’s highly rhetorical, and it’s highly rhetorical because of the intensity of Paul’s emotion. Paul begins by stating a key aspect of his ministry philosophy, if you like: he never wants to get in the way of his message receiving a fair hearing. As he says in v. 3,

We put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way.

Now, the Greek-speaking world in which Paul and the Corinthians lived was fascinated with the art of persuasion, what the Ancients called Rhetoric. Now a key tenet of ancient rhetoric is that if a person advocating for something cannot earn the respect of his speakers for his character, his argument counts for nothing. And Paul is acutely aware that what was true for lawyers and politicians was no less true for Christians evangelists. And, again, this is something that both Christians and non-Christians get instinctively today. No matter how coherently someone argues that Jesus is God’s rescue plan for humanity, if they treat other people poorly their argument will just not be persuasive.

Paul then follows up this statement of principle with a long list of qualifying phrases. The first group of these, which, sadly, is the only group we have time to consider, has to do the adverse conditions under which Paul would often find himself labouring, that is,

...in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments...

In other words, Paul is saying that he's not a fair-weather evangelist: he doesn't share Jesus with others only when it's easy or convenient to do so. The implication for us is that if we only talk about Jesus when it's easy for us to do so, when we are speaking with the grain of our surrounding culture, then that will detract from the persuasiveness of our message. This doesn't mean earbashing people with talk about God, regardless of whether they want to listen to us or not, but it does mean having a go at answering questions that start off with an incredulous, 'Tristan, you're a reasonable person, you can't actually believe that...?' as well as with the gentler, 'Tristan, you're a Christian, what do you think about...?'

Let me tell you about two different occasions this year where I've had the chance to say something about Jesus in a largely secular environment. The first occasion was during a meeting of the parents' association at Albuera Public School, where I was asking the association and principal to reconsider their decision to shut down the lunchtime Scripture Club. The second opportunity arose out of an interview I did with an artist-academic on the theme of sacrifice in the Christian life. The interview was a joy to take part in; the meeting stirred me up so much I'd lie awake sometimes in the weeks following it in the middle of the night ruminating on what I had said and failed to say. In the interview I was asked such interesting and sympathetic questions that it was pretty much impossible not to share about Jesus and his sacrificial death on our behalf; during the meeting I felt rushed for time, and anxious about being misunderstood. I'm sure I spoke much more coherently and warmly during the interview, but I wonder in retrospect whether the meeting wasn't the more significant of the two opportunities. After all, I was speaking in front of people I see every time I pick Miriam up from school; how I behaved both during and after the meeting would be seen and remembered. Now, while my version of waking up in the middle of the night is, I suspect, quite a few steps removed from Paul's sleepless nights here in 2 Corinthians 7, you get the point, don't you? Speaking gently and patiently, lovingly and sincerely about Jesus when it's unpopular to do so, can be actually more, not less, powerful, than when you're afloat on a sea of goodwill!

So, that's the first of the two implications for Christians as they think about themselves as Jesus' ambassadors: ambassadors don't let their own character or circumstances get in the way of the

message they have to deliver. And the second? Good ambassadors serve only one government, which brings us to the second part of this sermon:

PART TWO

'Come out from them and be separate'

Now, it's worth remembering at this point that Paul's *primary* objective so far has not been to show the Corinthians how to share Jesus with others when things are hard. That's only an *implication* of these verses. His primary objective has been to get the Corinthians to drop their standoffish, suspicious stance towards him by acknowledging the reality of how Paul has conducted himself among them in the past, even, and especially, when times were tough.

But if the Corinthians are going to revive their friendship with Paul, that will entail stepping out from under the influence of those people in the church in Corinth who've been trying to discredit him in their eyes. So far in this letter Paul has been loathe to make distinctions between the different factions within the Corinthian church and their representatives. But here he feels the need to issue a more pointed warning concerning the people who have sought to turn the Corinthians as a whole against him. These opponents, a group scholars call the 'super-apostles', will turn up again in chapters 10-13, but vv. 14-18 are likely to be referring to the same group of people and form a 'shot across the bow', if you like.

Paul pulls no punches here, referring to them straight up as 'unbelievers' (v.1). Read with me from v. 14:—

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God.

Paul sprays the Corinthians with a series of indignant, rhetorical questions, all of which expect the answer: 'None whatsoever!' And he then buttresses those questions with a series of citations from the Old Testament, all of which speak to the exclusive relationship God had sought to establish with his Old Testament people, the Israelites. In this relationship God promised to bless the Israelites with a depth of relationship with him unknown to other nations. They in turn committed themselves to follow no other God but him. Theirs was to be an *exclusive* relationship.

Now, my suspicion here is that exclusivity will feel like quite an alien concept for many of us. We live in an era of dual citizenship, bivocational ministry, blending time spent at home raising kids with part-time work outside the home. Many of us live in a world of ‘both...and’, where saying no to something in order to pursue something else seems perhaps just a bit... old-fashioned?

Now, let me preface what I’m about to say by confessing that I, too, am very much a ‘both...and’ kind of guy! But – and it’s a big ‘but’ – I do want to stress this morning that being and becoming Christian has at its heart a big, fat ‘either...or’! Following Jesus is an exclusive commitment: it means not giving anyone or anything else your allegiance in a way that would compromise your loyalty to Jesus.

Now, what Paul dislikes about the super-apostles (apart from their criticism of him, of course) is their *worldliness*: they cherry-pick Christianity for whatever chimes in well with the surrounding culture—and discard the rest. They’re attempting to have a foot in both camps, and for all his commitment to flexibility when sharing Jesus with people from other cultures, Paul here is adamant: you cannot follow *both* Jesus *and* the world. Paul uses the metaphor of a yoke. A yoke is something farmers place over the necks of oxen when harnessing them to the plough. The verb Paul uses here, ἔτεροζυγέω, means to harness to the one cart animals that really need different sorts of yokes, as one would be doing if one yoked, say, an ox and a donkey to one’s plough. It can also mean to mate animals of different species, as it does, for example, in the ancient Greek translation of Leviticus 19:19. But the point of the metaphor is, either way, clear: if we link our destiny in a binding way and voluntarily surrender our freedom to people who don’t share our commitment to God, then that’s going to make it very difficult for us to be wholehearted about our relationship with God. We will find ourselves being constantly torn in different directions.

So Paul’s *aim* in this passage is to help the Corinthians awaken to the way in which they’ve allowed themselves to be swayed by people whose value-system is at odds with their supposed commitment to Christ. But what does this passage *imply* for us? Let me say something first to those of us who have made a commitment to Jesus, and then secondly to those of us who are thinking through what it might look like to make such a commitment.

My question for those of us at St George’s who call themselves Christian is this: How can you know whether you’ve been hitching yourself to something that in the end is incompatible with an exclusive relationship with Jesus? Well, for what it’s worth, this is how I recognise it in myself. I am one of those people who suffer from selective hearing. I’m great at hearing only

what I want to hear. Unfortunately, I also do this when I read the Bible. And at those times when whatever I read in the Bible seems to be telling me what I want it be telling me, when there's no gap between I what I want and what I think Jesus is asking of me, *that's* when the alarm bells need to start ringing. Because I'll never know if Jesus really is the Lord of my life if I never find it inconvenient for Jesus to be the Lord of my life, if I only ever listen to him when it chimes in with what I already want to hear. This is a really insidious problem for Christians, because, if you're anything like me, it's a problem that tends to creep up on you over time without your noticing it.

This year I've been reading quite a lot of Muriel Spark, a twentieth-century novelist most famous for her book, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. While on holidays recently I read her first novel, *The Comforters*, written shortly after she'd become a Christian. The main character in the novel is a young woman named Catharine, also a new believer, and, in a passage one suspects is somewhat autobiographical, she has Catherine exclaim,

'the demands of the Christian religion are exorbitant, they are outrageous. Christians who don't realise that from the start are not faithful. They are dishonest; their teachers are talking in their sleep.'

And again, for what it's worth, I think she's right. Because Jesus doesn't want just a part of us. He wants all of us. And I think it's helpful, even for people who've been Christian for ages, to be periodically reminded of the outrageous reality that we are not our own: we now belong to someone else.

My question for those of us who are exploring Christianity here at St George's is this: How is it possible to make such a seemingly crazy decision to place someone else in charge of your life, and them alone? Earlier in this sermon I said that exclusive commitments seem to be something of an anomaly in modern life, but one area of life where I think people still place a high value on exclusivity is in marriage. Marriage may be becoming an increasingly marginal part of today's society, but I think that people today still think that marriage is only really marriage if it entails an exclusive commitment to just one person, and that over the long haul, and that the value of marriage is somehow dependant on that exclusivity as it's expressed over a period of time. And I think that's because in marriage we want to feel safe, and it's hard to feel safe in a marriage relationship if you don't know that the other person is in it with you for the long haul and is not going to go anywhere else when things get tough. Again, I think it's worth stressing that this is not what marriage necessarily looks like 'on the ground', ever really, but rather that this remains an enduring aspiration in our culture for romantic relationships. And my point is that following

Jesus as Lord is an exclusive relationship of that type. Jesus is promising you nothing less than his very self. He's not going to abandon you when you stuff up, or move on to someone else after the first bloom of your relationship is over, or withdraw into himself as you bring before him those parts of yourself that you'd never dare show to anyone else for fear that they'd never be able to respect you afterwards. Exclusivity is a yoke you take on yourself when what you need is commitment. Jesus says, 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

Let's pray, and then we'll sing.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your deep, deep commitment to and love for us in Jesus. We thank you that when we need you most, you won't abandon us. Please help us today to take upon ourselves again Jesus' easy yoke and find rest with him. Help us to leave the things of earth behind, to follow only him.

In his name,

Amen.