

THE GOSPEL HAS POWER

Central Baptist Church 9 September 2007

1. PRIDE IN THE GOSPEL

Pride is one of the seven deadly sins – for pride it is that cuts us off from God, and also from one another..

But not all pride is deadly. E.g.

- Like every other grandparent, I am proud of my grand-children – Jemima & Felix are the absolute tops as far as I am concerned.
- Along with other members of the Ghana team, I am proud of the medical centre we managed to complete.

Similarly here at the beginning of his letter to the Romans Paul rightly expresses his pride in the Gospel: **“I have complete confidence in the gospel”**; literally **“I am not ashamed of the Gospel”** (NRSV) - or as Peterson puts it in *The Message*: *“I’m most proud to proclaim this extraordinary Message of God’s powerful plan to rescue everyone who trusts him”*.

Paul was proud – or was he?

Actually, I think that there were times when Paul was probably tempted to be ashamed of the Gospel.

Look at the context of these brave words. Paul was in Corinth, and while there he had begun to write a letter to the church in Rome to pave the way for his visit.

I’m longing to see you all, he writes: **“I am eager to preach the Good News to you also who are in Rome”** (1.15).

But then it seems to me that all of a sudden he has second thoughts: ‘Goodness, do I really know what I am saying? Am I really that eager to preach the good news of Jesus in the world’s greatest metropolis? How on earth will all those sophisticated Romans react to my preaching? Won’t they respond with derision as they hear me, a mere provincial?’ I can imagine Paul mopping his brow at this point.

For a moment his confidence wavers. But then he pulls himself together.

Yes, **“I am eager to preach the good news to you all who are in Rome. I have complete confidence in the gospel”** (GNB); **“I am not ashamed: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith”**.

Paul knew that the Gospel & Rome were two incompatibles:

- To proud Rome, which regarded itself as the hub of the universe, nothing could have appeared more insignificant than the Gospel catering around some carpenter’s son, executed by some minor civil servant in a troublesome little country right on the very edge of the civilised world
- To powerful Rome, capital of the mightiest empire the world had ever seen, nothing could have been weaker than to talk of the power of God’s love. Why, Rome had conquered the world by the sword and the strength of her legions – force, not love, was the key.
- To sophisticated Rome nothing could have been more ludicrous than to talk of a man rising from the dead. Why Festus, the Roman procurator of Judea, when he heard Paul preach, had remarked that Paul had become mad by his learning.

Yes, to proud, powerful, sophisticated Rome the Good News of Jesus must have seemed insignificant, weak & ludicrous. And yet Paul says: “**I am not ashamed**” (NRSV); ‘*I’m proud*’; “**I have complete confidence in the gospel**” (GNB)

All that was 2000 years ago. What about today & today’s Christians?

Are we equally proud of the Gospel?

The power of Rome has come and gone. We live in a very different world.

And yet for all the differences, our society is just as sceptical of the Gospel.

Christians are in a minority here in the UK – we have become a ‘peculiar’ people – as a result the media poke fun at, if not look down upon, committed Christians.

If we are honest, are there not times when we are tempted to be ashamed?

Let me ask you: do your neighbours know where you are this morning/afternoon?

Do your colleagues at work know that you are a churchgoer?

Yet these questions evade the real point. Paul doesn’t say “*I am not ashamed of the church*”, but “**I am not ashamed of the Gospel**”

Right at the beginning of the sermon I said that I am proud of my grand-children - & because I am proud I’m not at all reticent to tell others about them.

What’s more, I don’t have to wait until they are really close friends before I begin to tell them about my grand-children – why I can even talk to the barber about them.

The same is true of my pride in what we achieved in Atorkor. I took some trousers to be dry-cleaned and began to talk to the assistant about Atorkor – an African came in, & I immediately began to tell him about our trip. At the checkout at Sainsbury’s both the cashier as also the girl helping with the packing about what we had achieved in Ghana.

We need to be equally proud of the Gospel.

We need to be equally confident to talk about the difference Jesus has made to us.

Just as Paul was eager to preach the Good News of Jesus to his contemporaries, so at the very least we should be eager to invite our friends to evangelistic or pre-evangelistic events here in church: e.g.

- on Sat evening 22nd we have the comedian John Archer doing his stuff – John will entertain us, and he will also in a non-cringemaking way share his faith – but the concern I have is: will there be non-church people present to hear him?
- Next month we are beginning our next Alpha course – the introductory supper will be on Mon October 15 – a wonderful opportunity for our non-Christian friends to explore the basics of the Christian faith in a non-threatening environment.
- The night before our third International Evening: special international music, special international food, further report on Atorkor – a great opportunity to show our friends that Christians can be normal people

Of course not everything we put on here will be appropriate for your friends – but some will be. The question is: will you have the confidence to invite your friends? “**I am not ashamed of the Gospel**”. May that be true of each one of us.

2. PRESUPPOSITION OF THE GOSPEL

Paul was proud of the Gospel, because it was God's power to save. This presumes that there is a need to be saved. So from Paul's pride on the gospel, let's turn to the presupposition underlying the Gospel.

For Paul the two are clearly linked. So, immediately following on his expression of pride in the Gospel, Paul goes on to describe how the whole human race lies under the judgement of God. **"God's anger is revealed from heaven against all the sin and evil of the people whose evil ways prevent the truth being known"** (1.18).

He then spends the rest of the chapter depicting the wickedness of the world in which he lived.

Frankly, it's not the kind of stuff to read to children. For along with such sins as **"evil, greed.. jealousy, murder, fighting, deceit and malice"** (1.29), he is also pretty explicit about sexual promiscuity & sexual perversion: **"God has given them over to shameful passions. Even women pervert the natural use of their sex by unnatural actions. In the same way the men give up natural sexual relations with women & burn with passion for each other. Men do shameful things with each other, and as a result they bring upon themselves the punishment they deserve for their wrong-doing"** (1.26,27)..

All of this he traces back to the ultimate sin of men & women turning their backs upon God: **"Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly seen; they are perceived in the things that God has made. So these people have no excuse at all!"** (1.20).

As a result of people turning their backs upon God, God has turned his back upon them – or rather, he has let them stew in their own juice by giving them up to the consequences of their own sin.

Interestingly Paul sees judgement of God taking place not just in the future, but also in the present. Hell can be today, and not just tomorrow.

The world is in a hellish mess – this is the presupposition underlying Paul's pride in the Gospel. Yes, in spite of all her glamour, Rome was also full of every kind of vice.

- As Tacitus, the Roman historian put it: *"Into Rome every foul & horrible thing finds its way sooner or later"*. Society was in a mess – and there was nobody able to help.
- In the words of Seneca, whose life coincided with Paul: *"What we need is a hand to lift us up"* – but there was none.

Our world is no better. Our society is in a mess.

You only have to read the papers to see how greed, violence, lust and promiscuity characterise so much of modern life.

In so many areas of modern life we offend God's holy laws.

Today's Western civilisation, like the civilisation of Rome, has become rotten to the core.

The words of Paul are as relevant as ever **"God's anger is revealed from heaven against all the sin & evil of the people whose evil ways prevent the truth being known"**. In a very real sense we need saving – saving from the consequences of our sin and evil..

3. THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

It's against this backcloth that Paul declares: "**I am not ashamed of the gospel**" (NRSV); "**I have complete confidence in the Gospel: it is God's power to save all who believe**". Yes, there is power in the Gospel.

The word Paul uses for **power** is the word from which we get our English word dynamite – *dunamis*. The Good News of Jesus packs an amazing punch. The Gospel is quite literally dynamite!

Dynamite today has been put into the shade by the power of the atom. But nonetheless, it still packs a punch. It also offers a great analogy for the Gospel.

Just like dynamite has power to crack the hardest of rocks, so the Gospel has power to crack the hardest of hearts. The good news of Jesus has power to change the most resistant of hearts. It has power to transform the most degraded of sinners.

Paul knew that from his own experience.

At one stage Paul led the opposition to the Christian church - he hounded the followers of Jesus. We don't know the degree of suffering Paul had inflicted upon the first Christians, but clearly it was not inconsiderable. It wasn't for nothing that Paul once described himself as "**the worst**" of sinners (1 Tim 1.15).

And yet God had saved him – and if he could save him, then as far as Paul was concerned he could save anybody.

Do you believe that?

Do you have "**complete confidence**", as Paul had, in the power of the Gospel?

I sometimes wonder whether the reason why some people are not as enthusiastic about sharing the Good News of Jesus is that they are not always certain that God can really save some of their friends or colleagues who seem to have no faith whatsoever.

Can the Gospel really crack these hard nuts?

Let me tell you of a woman I once knew. She was a hard woman – life had made her hard – indeed, she had to be hard in order to cope with the incredibly tough life she had had. When I first knew her, she was determined to have nothing to do with God. She was so determined to have nothing to do with God, that she asked her neighbour round to witness the fact that she wanted an atheist's funeral – no minister was to call around, once she had died.

But she had a Christian daughter – this daughter prayed & prayed for her mother, she wept before God for her mother, and as she prayed and she wept she believed God would indeed save her mother. The day came when her faith was rewarded and her prayers were answered – her mother put her trust in Jesus. A little later her mother died: and I had the privilege of taking that funeral.

The fact is that the gospel is 'dynamite' - it does have power – power to save even the most hardened of people. "**I am not ashamed**" – "**I have full confidence**".

Perhaps the challenge this morning is to for some of us to believe that the Gospel does have power.

4. THE PURPOSE OF THE GOSPEL

“I am not ashamed of the gospel” (NRSV); “I have complete confidence in the gospel: it is God’s power to save all who believe”.

If there are no limits to God’s power, then there are no limits to God’s salvation.
God’s salvation is for all who have faith, for all who believe
I never fail to be mobbed by Paul’s incredibly large vision.
When the church was still in its infancy, when it was a small struggling group of people,
Paul had the world in view.

“Our message is that God was making the whole human race his friends through Christ” (2 Cor 5.19).

Paul was the great universalist: he looked for the salvation of everyone.

True, for the Gospel to be effective, it has to be met with faith.

But in principle Paul was quite clear: Christ died for every man, woman & child.

Do we believe this?

Do we believe that the Gospel is God’s power to save all – to save every man, woman & child here in Chelmsford?

I last preached on this text almost 15 years ago – I preached it on the evening of 25 October 1992. It was the occasion when I came to Chelmsford to ‘preach with a view’. Let me quote from that sermon:

“How large is your vision. Do you simply have a vision of a full church – or does your vision encompass all of Chelmsford?”

For me this point is absolutely fundamental. It links in with the issues of the future ministry of this church. What kind of vision do you have?

What kind of senior minister are you looking for?

Are you looking for a chaplain to keep you comfortable – or a leader with a passion for evangelism – who will constantly seek to mobilise this church for mission – who will never be satisfied with a packed church.

I plead with you to catch the spirit of Paul – to be proud of the Gospel – so proud that this week you will gladly and cheerfully this gospel with friends and neighbours – only in this way will they have a chance of experiencing God’s saving power”

The challenge I gave then is the challenge I would leave with you today.

Let’s be proud of the Gospel – **it is God’s power to save all who believe.**