

2 COR 1.12 – 2.5: GOD CAN BE TRUSTED [Chelmsford 29/5/2011]

WE NEED TO BE TO TRUSTWORTHY

A policeman in the States was having lunch at a cafe he regularly visited. Over the time he had been going there he had become friendly with one particular waitress, who always served him. While he was eating, he was filling in his entry in the local public lottery, putting down numbers as he thought of them. He turned to the waitress and asked her to call out some numbers at random. She did so, and with them he completed the coupon. As he left the cafe, he told the waitress that, if he won, he would give her half the winnings. His entry won the 1st prize of 6 million dollars. The day after he got the money, he went into the cafe and gave the girl exactly half of it. Rebuked by the cynical for such wanton generosity, he said that a promise was a promise, and added that anyway friendship was more important than money.

The Apostle Paul was also a man who kept faith with his friends - he was a man who kept his word. **"We are proud"**, wrote Paul to the church at Corinth, **"that our conscience assures us that our lives in this world, and especially our relations with you, have been ruled by God-given frankness and sincerity"** (1.12).

Unfortunately at the time of writing this letter there was a group in the church who questioned his integrity. *"Paul, you are not a man of your word - you promised to visit us on your way to Macedonia, and then again on your return trip, but you didn't - you are not to be trusted - you are a 'yes & no' man. Paul, we can't trust you"*

Paul was stung to the quick. ***"Do you think I talk out of both sides of my mouth - a glib 'yes' one moment, a glib 'no' the next?"*** (1.17 Peterson).

Paul was hopping mad. And so would I have been.

As a pastor nothing gets me more upset when people question my integrity.

I don't mind people saying they disagree with me - that I am wrong, foolish, pig-headed or whatever - but I do mind intensely if people question my sincerity.

For me as a pastor, there is nothing more important than my integrity.

But to return to Paul: it was true that he hadn't visited them as he had promised.

But this was not due to his fickleness or his inability to keep his word.

Rather, since making that promise, the situation had changed.

There had been a pastoral problem at Corinth which the Corinthians had botched up and failed to deal with properly - had Paul visited them there would have been an almighty showdown and he would have torn them off a strip - **"It was in order to spare you that I decided not to go to Corinth"** (1.23). It was love and concern for them, not fickleness, which had caused Paul to change plans.

However, the accusation against Paul drew from him not just an explanation - but also a defence of his own personal integrity as a preacher of the word of God: **"When I make my plans, do I make them from selfish motives, ready to say 'Yes, yes' and 'No, no' at the same time? As surely as God speaks the truth, my promise to you was not a 'Yes' and a 'No'. For Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was preached among you by Silas, Timothy and myself, is not one who is 'Yes' and 'No. On the**

contrary, he is God's 'Yes'; for it is he who is the 'Yes' to all God's promises"
(1.17b-20a).

For Paul to doubt his integrity was tantamount to doubting his message.

Paul realised that if he couldn't be trusted in everyday matters, then there was no reason to trust him in the things he said about God.

However, instead of calling upon others to testify to his integrity, Paul links the truth of his message with God himself: "**God speaks the truth**" (1.18 GNB); "**God is faithful**" (NRSV/NIV) - "**God is to be trusted**" (REB) - God keeps his word, and so, by inference, Paul the messenger is a person who keeps his word too.

The integrity of the message intimately linked with the integrity of the messenger.

Here is a principle of fundamental importance to any Christian preacher.

Indeed, it is a principle which also affects each one of us here this morning.

For it is incumbent on every Christian to share the good news of Jesus.

All of us are called to be "**ambassadors for Christ**" (2 Cor 5.20).

All of us therefore have to be people of integrity if our message is to be believed.

At the end of the day it is character rather than charisma which will cause our message to be believed.. What we are impacts on what we say.

If people can see that we are people to be trusted, then they may well be open to our message about the God who can be trusted.

As an aside, let me also go on to say that ***integrity is to be the mark not only of our relationships outside the church, but also inside the church.***

We need to keep our word with one another. For when we fail to keep our word with one another the Body of Christ suffers and the cause of the Gospel is undermined.

The life and mission of our church are dependent upon our fulfilling our commitments.

Listen to some words of wisdom from David Prior, an Anglican vicar: "*In the daily life of a local church, one is constantly falling foul of people who fail to keep their promises over very ordinary tasks... They may have promised to help in cleaning the church or in delivering some letters (leaflets), but then something else crops up which they really want to do, and their promises counts for nothing. This lack of integrity... is arguably the single most serious obstacle to the steady growth of the church..*"!!

Like Paul, we need to be men and women of our word - men and women who can be trusted. However, this is not the main thrust of my sermon this morning.

Even more importantly I want to go on and say: ***God can be trusted.***

GOD CAN TRUSTED

"God speaks the truth" (1.18), says Paul. **God is to be trusted**" (REB)
"God is faithful" (NRSV & NIV) "*God is true to his word*" (Peterson)

The faithfulness of God is a familiar Old Testament theme: e.g. in Deut 7.9 we hear Moses say the people of Israel, "**The Lord your God is faithful. He will keep his covenant and show his constant love to.... those who love him and obey his commands**".

Paul takes up this faithfulness theme and sees God's faithfulness - his trustworthiness - in the new covenant he has made with us in Jesus.

In particular in this context he makes two statements: viz. *God's promises are fulfilled in Jesus and they are confirmed by the gift of his Spirit.*

Let's look at the way in which he develops his argument

1. GOD'S PROMISES ARE FULFILLED IN JESUS

(a) *In Jesus God says "Yes" to us*

"Jesus is God's 'Yes'; for it is he who is the 'Yes' to all God's promises" (1.19c, 20a). I.e. everything God has ever promised us he has made good to us in Jesus.

Paul was no doubt thinking of all *the OT prophecies* which Jesus fulfilled.

- Jesus, is the Christ, the Son of David, and has fulfilled all the hopes of the long-promised Messiah.
- Jesus is not just the Son of God; he is also a "**son of Abraham**" and has fulfilled the promise given to Abraham, that in him all the nations are to be blessed (Gen 12.,3; 18.18)
- Jesus is God's Servant, and he has fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 53 that "**on him the Lord has laid the iniquity of us all**" (Is 53.6)
- Jesus is God's "Righteous One", and in him was fulfilled the prophecy of Habakkuk that "**the just shall live by faith**" (Hab 2.4)

God can be trusted, for he is faithful, he keeps his promises. To quote David Prior again: "*Has God offered to forgive our sins? We have forgiveness in Jesus. Has God promised never to fail us or forsake us? We have the presence of God with us in Jesus to the end of time. Has God promised to put a new heart and a new spirit within us? Through Jesus we have the gift of the Holy Spirit. Has God promised to call us his own sons & daughters, to guide us and to provide us? We are the children of God in his Son, Jesus, and this God will be our guide for ever. Has God promised us eternal life and an inheritance in heaven? These gifts are ours in Jesus*".

In Jesus God in his love has said 'Yes' to us.

God can be trusted because of what he has done for us in Jesus.

There are times when everything seems to go wrong in our lives - a loved one dies, ill-health dogs us, or redundancy looms - and we wonder whether God really does care for us.

We cry out "*God, if you love us, then why have you allowed this to happen?*"

We wonder whether we can trust God any more.
But as we look back to Jesus and his Cross we see there that we do count.
God does care for us - he cared for us sufficiently to send his Son into this world.
Amidst all the uncertainties of life one thing for certain is that God can be trusted.
We can trust God - whatever our present circumstances may be

(b) In Jesus we say 'Yes' to God

I.e. we can trust God too when we pray to him in the name of Jesus.
Or as Paul says: "**This is why through Jesus Christ our 'Amen' is said to the glory of God**" (1.20b)

We normally finish our prayers of intercession with words such as "*through Jesus Christ our Lord*" or "*in the name of Jesus*" and then end them with an "**Amen**".
This "**Amen**" is no mere formality. The word Amen comes from a Hebrew word which literally means "*faithfulness*" or "*trustworthiness*", and so comes to mean "So let it be" - "**Yes**" in fact.

- In the first place when we say **Amen** at the end of somebody's prayer it is our way of telling God that we agree with the prayer that has been said - "*so let it be*"
- But it is also ***an expression of confidence***: because Jesus came, we can offer prayers to God with confidence. Jesus is our guarantee that prayers will be heard and will be answer! God can be trusted because we know he keeps his promises in Jesus.

2. GOD'S PROMISES ARE CONFIRMED BY THE GIFT OF HIS SPIRIT

"It is God himself who makes us... sure of our life in union with Christ; it is God himself who has set us apart, who has placed his mark of ownership upon us, and who has given us the Holy Spirit in our hearts as the guarantee of all that he has in store for us" (1.21-22).

a) the Spirit is God's stamp of ownership

"God has placed his mark of ownership upon us" (v22)
Older versions: "**God has put his seal on us**" (NRSV)

There was a time when a merchant selecting timber at a port, would stamp it with his own signet ring, acknowledging that it belonged to him. In due time he would send a trusted agent with that signet ring, who would locate all the timbers that bore the corresponding impress and claim them for his master.

The Holy Spirit is God's stamp or **mark of ownership**.

We know that we are his because of the Spirit.

"The Spirit makes you God's children and by the Spirit we cry 'Abba, Father'", wrote Paul to the church at Rome (Rom 8.15-17a).

He goes on: "**God's Spirit joins himself to our spirit to declare that we are God's**

children. Since we are his children we will possess the blessings he keeps for his people".

God is to be trusted for the future because he has given us his Spirit in the present. The Spirit confirms the truth of God's promises.

b) the Spirit is God's down-payment

"He has given us the Holy Spirit in our hearts as the guarantee of all that he has in store for us"; he has given *"us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment"* (NRSV) – *"as a pledge of what is to come"* (REB)

The underlying Greek word (*arrabon*) here was very common in Greek legal documents: e.g. we read that

- a woman selling a cow receives 1000 drachma as a "*arrabon*" that the rest of the price will be paid
- some dancing girls engaged for a village festival received an "*arrabon*" as a guarantee that the contract would be honoured & the money paid in full
- a man writes to his master that he has paid Lampon the mouse catcher an "*arrabon*" of 8 drachma, so that he will start and catch the mice while they are still young.

The Spirit is God's down-payment, his pledge of things to come, his **guarantee**. Already in the here and now we can begin to know something of the life of heaven. **"God's kingdom is... righteousness & peace & joy which the Holy Spirit gives"** (Rom 14.17): i.e. already in the here and now we may know something of the peace and joy which comes from being right with God - and that is the work of God's Spirit in our lives.

God's Spirit not only makes God real in our lives, but also by the Spirit we already begin to share in the life of God.

How do we know that life in God's heaven is not wishful thinking?

The Spirit confirms the truth of God's promises

So in conclusion, God can be trusted

Indeed, he has given us proof of his trustworthiness

With our minds we can look at Jesus and see that God can be trusted

In our hearts we can experience the Spirit and know that God can be trusted.

Just as the American policeman did not let down his waitress friend, neither will God let down his friends. God does not go back on his promises.

When we put our trust in Jesus, he will not fail us.

God has promised to care for us – and to care for us eternally

In the words of the Apostle Paul, **"we have placed our hope in him"** and **"he will save us"** (1.10).

In a world where so little is certain, one thing is certain: God can be trusted.

Who knows what will happen to the stock market? Who knows what will happen to the housing market? When it comes to the future there is so much that is unknown.

But one thing is sure: **"there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Rom 8.39). God never lets down his friends.