

Romans 15: 14-33 - Making Christ Known: Remembrance Sunday 2016

Sometimes wars are fuelled by greed, perhaps over land or over scarce natural resources. Sometimes they are fuelled by racial hatred or feelings of superiority. Sometimes, as with the First World War, they come about through plotting and tangled alliances. Sometimes they are necessary to defeat tyranny and evil. I suspect most wars are described in this way by those who want to fight them, but certainly one can look at the Second World War and perhaps some more recent interventions as being fuelled by a righteous anger against oppression, persecution or wicked ideologies. And of course sometimes wars are fuelled by religious zeal. We see that with Isis at the moment, don't we?

Sadly there have been times throughout history where Christians, having wrongly interpreted parts of the Bible, have set out to win land for Jesus by military means. But whilst a plain and simple reading of the Quran is certainly in line with Muslims using military action, or even brutal oppression, to expand the territory under Islamic rule, that cannot be said of the Bible. Both the teachings of Jesus and the way he lived out his life demonstrate very clearly that, for the Christian and the Christian church, the means of growing the kingdom of God into places and cultures which have not yet heard the gospel are not only non-military, they are entirely peaceful.

That's not to say that some people won't object to the very idea of Christians trying to convince people who follow other faiths to turn to Christ or that when that happens there is not some social upheaval and change in a society or culture. But it is to say, and I make no apologies for saying it, that when a previously unreached people group or culture comes to Christ it is always, always a good thing.

Now I am aware that such a view today is very unpopular. Our culture has moved from allowing freedom of religion to promoting the view that all religions are equally valid, with none being uniquely true. I personally think that idea is intellectually indefensible: two opposing truths cannot be equally true. Either one is true and the other is false or they are both false. They can't both be right. And that means that for the Christian sharing the good news of Jesus with those who don't yet know him is a moral imperative. According to the Bible those outside of Christ, whether they are in our village or town or on the other side of the world, face a lost eternity, so how can we not want to share the good news of Jesus with them,? Christianity has always been a missionary faith and the mission of the church is to make Christ known afresh in each new generation.

In our reading from Romans chapter 15 today we saw just how convinced the apostle Paul was of that fact. Since his life-changing encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul's life had been spent proclaiming Jesus. Paul was a pioneer, an evangelist and an apostle of Christ. By this time in his ministry he had been on several long missionary journeys through large parts of Greece and modern day Turkey, and he was now on his way back to Jerusalem before setting off on yet another mission. Although the Roman Empire ruled much of the known world, Paul wanted to build an empire for Jesus and to plant churches where no church currently existed. That was his mission. And in this passage we see many of the things that underpinned that mission. We can see something of his reasoning, his aim, his focus, his means, his strategy and we get a glimpse of the weapons Paul fought with and also see a little of the cost. Just as today we remember the price that so many have paid over the years for our freedom, so there was also a cost to Paul, and to many others across the centuries, in spreading the gospel.

Firstly though **Paul's reasons** for his mission.

Paul could have had a very comfortable life. He was well educated, well respected and a Roman citizen to boot with great privileges, and yet having met with Jesus he could not shrink from answering the call of his Lord. Why? Because of what Jesus had done for him.

That's what he's talking about in those early verses. Paul's passion for mission flows out of what God had done for him. He knew how sinful he was, he knew what a great work of salvation God had worked in his life, and he knew how much that had cost Jesus. In the Old Testament priests would bring sacrifices for sin and thank offerings for God's blessing and forgiveness. But Paul knew that all the sacrifices necessary for sins to be forgiven, were made by

Jesus and so he offered his whole life as a thank offering to God. And if we have been saved by faith in Christ then that should be our response too.

Secondly we see **Paul's aim**. I'm sure that like me, you love it when the church is full. But whilst getting bums on seats is great, we can't stop there. Certainly Paul didn't. He wasn't interested in just proclaiming the good news of Jesus so that people had a one-time religious experience or would come to church at Christmas. He wanted disciples not converts. He wanted people whose whole lives are completely transformed by the love and grace of God.

You see coming to church isn't enough. Being on the electoral roll isn't enough. Having folks who are baptised or who occasionally read their Bible or who serve in some way wouldn't have been satisfied Paul, and I have to say it should not be enough for us. Paul's mission, and our true mission, is to go out and make disciples of all nations so that all those following Christ are increasingly sanctified by the Holy Spirit. That means being changed in their character to be more like Jesus. Is that how we view the mission of the church? Is that how we view our own walk of faith? It should be.

Thirdly, we see **Paul's focus**. Over the last weeks, and at the away day yesterday, lots of good ideas were brought up about how we can grow God's kingdom here. But whatever we do, like Paul, our focus needs to be on the gospel. Paul knew, verse 16, that his duty was the proclamation of the gospel. It wasn't to run flashy programs or offer better coffee or have more comfortable seats or run food banks, although there is certainly nothing wrong in any of those things. Paul's focus was on proclaiming the good news of Jesus and the glory of God. And if you took the time to read the little book by Kevin DeYoung you would have seen that point made again and again. The focus of our mission is to declare Jesus. We are to tell what he has done for us. We are to point people to him. We are to amaze them with God. Whatever decisions we make over the coming days and months by our PCCs, we must not lose this prime focus.

Fourthly, we see something of **Paul's means**. Occasionally, and usually when people have some doubts about the morality of what they are doing, people suggest that the ends justify the means. But for Paul the means of spreading the gospel must always be in complete accord with the message of the gospel. That's why using violence or threats to compel people to become Christians is an absolute wrong. Instead Paul says here that he has led people to Christ by what he has *"said and done and by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God."*

Throughout the New Testament we see that the preaching of Jesus' first apostles was often accompanied by miraculous signs which gave greater credence to their words. Now God can still work miracles today. I have absolutely no doubt about that. We should pray for the sick and the suffering and have the confidence that God can act in miraculous ways because God is still the same, yesterday, today and forever. But there was something special about those early days when those things happened more frequently. For us, however, whether or not God brings about miraculous healings to backup the truth of the gospel, our focus, as it has been for Christians over the ages, should be on our words and actions both pointing to Jesus.

We can't be people who say one thing but live differently. If we are preaching a message of God's forgiveness and grace and mercy to the undeserving, we need to be people who forgive and to show grace and mercy to the undeserving, however annoying and objectionable we find them. If we are proclaiming God's special care for the poor and underprivileged in society, then as a church we need to be living that out in generosity and service and love. People will not be attracted to Jesus unless the lives of Christians are attractive. The apostle Paul lived out what he preached. Are we doing that?

Fifthly we see a little of **Paul's strategy**. From verse 23 onwards Paul explains to his readers that once he has finished his mission in Jerusalem he wanted to go to Rome and then go on to Spain where the gospel had not yet been preached. From Paul's perspective, he has finished the work God gave him to do in Macedonia and Greece. That isn't because Paul had preached in every village and small town in the area because he hadn't: It was because Paul's strategy was to go to the cities. Paul preached in the cities, he disciplined people in the cities, and he established

churches in the cities with the hope and expectation that those churches would then reach out with the good news of Jesus to the smaller towns and villages around them.

One of the reasons so many lives were lost during the First World War was that the military strategy was so weak. And perhaps one of the reasons why the church in this country is shrinking is that our strategy has also been weak. That's why we've had a week of prayer and a day away yesterday to seek God's direction and God's strategy for reaching the people around us. Please continue to pray for that. We have limited resources, and limited time, just as Paul did. And like him we need to make decisions about the best strategy to reach the most people with the gospel; and to find the best ways to encourage all Christians to become disciple-living and disciple-making disciples. Paul's vision was to boldly go into the cities where no one had gone before. That was the call God laid on him. Please continue to pray that we would know God's direction for us.

Sixthly, we get a glimpse of **Paul's weapons**. Notice that these are not physical weapons: the gospel of Jesus declared fearlessly, a godly life lived out openly and the Holy Spirit at work in him powerfully but we also see the importance of prayer. We don't have physical strongholds to overcome but we do have spiritual strongholds to overcome so we need prayer. We need to pray for our friends and neighbours who don't yet know Jesus that God would reveal himself to them. And we need to pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ that we all might live holy lives and declare the good news of Jesus clearly, gently and fearlessly as we should. Prayer is the greatest weapon of the church and if we are not praying for one another and for God's kingdom to grow, is it any wonder that lives are not changed and the pews remain empty?

And finally we see something of **Paul's cost** – and to all who join in this great kingdom building campaign. Paul knew that when he arrived in Jerusalem there were many who would seek his life. If you read the latter chapters of the Book of Acts you'll see that Paul is attacked, arrested, plotted against and spends many of his last years in prison before being killed in Rome. That was the real cost to Paul and it came on top of being ridiculed and beaten, stoned and flogged and shipwrecked, and often going hungry and thirsty as he pursued his God-given mission.

Tradition has it in fact that all but one of the initial 12 apostles died violent deaths as they sought to bring the good news of Jesus to an unbelieving world. Since then many others have died sharing in that mission. Some died here in our own country just a few centuries ago for proclaiming that the truth of the gospel of salvation is found through faith in Christ alone. Others died on mission fields in China, Africa and beyond. Sometimes their families questioned their sanity and pleaded with them to stay and live ordinary lives. In response to family and friends who pleaded with a young brilliant doctor named Jim Eliot not to take the good news of Jesus to an unreached tribe in South America he said this: *"he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."*

On a day when we remember the horrors of war and the sacrifices made by so many for our freedom from fear and tyranny, Jesus calls his church to take up arms in his service. But unlike the armies of the past we are to be kitted out with the gospel of peace, living lives of love and holiness, and holding out the free gift of grace and mercy, forgiveness, and eternal life.

We have good news to bring. We have a glorious kingdom to build. Let's hear and answer the call. Amen.