

Sunday Evening 25th May 2014, Kenneth Gray. 2 Corinthians 2:5-17 “An open door”

Having now digressed into a commentary on forgiveness, it is not clear in what context Paul is speaking but this passage is nonetheless very relevant for us today. It could be prompted by the matter of incest discussed in 1 Cor 5 or it could be that he has discovered other ways in which the church in Corinth is failing to withstand the sinful influence of the godless society around it.

Whatever the context, the Corinthian church, having previously failed to root out evil practices, has now decided to take draconian action – a very human response rather than a godly one, as Paul points out. Overreaction can so often be the worldly way. Here Paul is counselling against overreaction within the church. The problem for the modern church, Kenneth observed, is that rather than reacting robustly to sin we do not take sin seriously enough.

On so many big issues over the years the church has repeatedly said ‘This is where the line must be drawn’ then has proceeded to step over it. For example some 50 years ago the church ruled that, *in exceptional circumstances*, it would be possible to remarry in church people who had been divorced. It is now virtually impossible to find a church where such remarriages do not happen routinely. As a result there is hardly a family in Scotland now that has not had to confront the reality of divorce.

There have been many similar big issues that the church has dealt with over the years, many of which have proved to be extremely difficult for ministers to deal with pastorally (not theologically) despite how clear the Bible’s teaching might be on the matter.

This passage from Paul speaks very clearly to our church today. Another situation that ministers in Scotland now have frequently to confront is the likelihood that couples seeking to be married have already been living together outside wedlock. If Paul were to visit the Church of Scotland today he would be in tears!

In verse 11 Paul says ‘...in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.’ But today we cannot claim to be ‘aware’ - we are unaware of so much of the Evil One’s machinations that we blame God or one another. Satan sows division and disharmony so effectively and we do not even recognise him.

Taking a stand for Christianity means going against the tide of society. The question for each of us is what do we do in face of that tide? Do we drift along with it or take a stand?

Paul’s message to the Corinthian church was important because if Corinth became a place where evil practices were never challenged then it would be no different from the rest of society. Paul wanted the church to ‘walk the talk’ and live what it was preaching.

Kenneth regretted that the Church of Scotland now found itself in a kind of ‘groundhog day’ -seemingly trapped in a cycle of revisiting and reviewing the issue of homosexuality. Everyone knows it is wrong and that the Bible is against it yet the prevailing worldly wisdom is that ‘it’s just the way people are made’. They say to condemn it is the same as condemning people for, say, having red hair or blue eyes.

The Church of Scotland has been trying to remain true to Scripture in the face of strong pressure but is now moving towards the position where each congregation will be free to ‘step outside’ the stated position and do its own thing.

Paul tells the Corinthians to forgive *repentant* sinners. We are not made to sin or dishonour God. We are all created to honour and enjoy him. We must graciously stand up for biblical Christianity and pray for those who, unknowingly, are doing the devil’s work, otherwise the distinctiveness of the Church will disappear.

In this passage we find Paul in an unusual situation. ‘Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me...’ Usually when Paul came to town trouble with

the authorities often followed. He had hoped to find Titus at Troas and to receive from him an update on the condition of the church in Corinth but since Titus was not there Paul could not rest easy, such was his concern about the Corinthian brethren. Kenneth commented that we too should have Paul's urgent sense of concern about the needs of the Church and not stand by complacently when we see things happening within the Church which run counter to God's Word.

It is hard to pray when we are angry. We need to be humble and compassionate and take every opportunity to pray for the church. In particular we must put our energies and efforts into evangelising the young people in our community. We should, for example, be vigorously supporting West Renfrewshire Youth Trust as it takes full advantage of the current openness of the schools towards the SU clubs being organised there.

At the end of the passage Paul draws on his own experience of a Roman triumphal procession to paint a picture for us *'But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere.'*

Paul no doubt would have witnessed a typical Roman celebration where the achievements of a successful general would be fêted. Such a triumphal procession was the highest honour payable to a Roman hero.

The church in Corinth was in the minority and would almost be eradicated within a hundred years of Paul's writing. Today the church across the world is looking at the church in the West and wondering what's happening to us. They are concerned about our future as our numbers fall and as we compromise the principles on which we were founded. As the western church declines there is growth happening in places like South East Asia, Africa, South America. Christ's 'triumphal procession' is spreading across the world but does that characterise us? Are we the 'aroma' of the knowledge of Christ?

Increasingly in the West we are worshipping amongst those who are being saved and those who are perishing. If we do not seek to cast off our lives of sin to enjoy the fragrance of knowing Jesus then there is no hope, no grace.