

LOVE LETTERS

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Hosea 2: 14-20; Psalm 103: 1-13; 2 Corinthians 3: 1-6; Mark 2: 18-22

I want to focus on today's New Testament lesson – a short but very dense passage packed with ideas, Old Testament allusions, currents, cross-currents of thought. We need some background before we begin to unpack the passage a little.

Corinth was a large commercial centre West of Athens; Paul founded the church there in about AD50 while on his missionary journeys. He had a difficult and sometimes painful relationship with converts in the church there - it involved several letters and three visits that we know of.

This letter was written after Paul made a second visit to the city to deal with problems of behaviour and teaching. In particular, the church had had to discipline an individual who had strongly opposed Paul and his teaching and made his second visit to the church very difficult.

I want to pick up on two points from the passage but, before I do that, I want to read from a contemporary English translation to add a different perspective. [Read Message]

Letters of recommendation.

The first point is about the letters. In verse 1 Paul asks 'do we need letters of recommendation to you or from you?' Paul was involved in a dispute with a group in the Corinthian Church who believed that trustworthy teachers needed to carry letters of recommendation or testimonials from suitable authorities. Paul makes it clear that Christians in Corinth themselves were his letters of recommendation. The church itself was the result of his ministry - the ministry to which he was called and for which he was equipped by God [verse 4 talks about competence given by God]. The work of conversion in the hearts of Corinthian Christians had been carried out by the Holy Spirit through the preaching and teaching of Paul and his associate Timothy. Paul draws a comparison between the Old Covenant written on tablets of stone given to Moses at Mount Sinai and the new Covenant written in the hearts of new Christian converts. This reference echoes the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekl 11: 19) where Lord is quoted as saying "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh." The very existence of the Corinthian church was proof of Paul's apostleship and a visible sign of the validity and credibility of his ministry. In a sense the Corinthian Church was a letter from Christ to the world communicating God's purpose for humanity.

Triumphalist approach

Tied in with these ideas about letters of recommendation and God-given competence is a question that Paul was arguing with a group of opponents in the church in Corinth.

A part of the letter, 2 Corinthians, was dedicated to this dispute, which was about the criteria to use to judge ministry and who had the right to call himself an apostle of Christ: Paul or people in the Corinthian church whom he called 'false prophets'. We are not sure of their identity; they are thought to have been Jewish Christians from Jerusalem or Jewish members of the Corinthian church. As we know from Scriptures, the early church was troubled by men who called themselves apostles but went about sowing false teaching and causing dissension.

According to Paul's opponents, who took what has been called 'a triumphalist approach' an apostle was expected to be personally impressive, a good speaker, have a commanding presence, exercise authority over others and have proper Jewish ancestry. His claim to be an apostle would be supported by visions, revelations of God, signs and wonders and a manifestation of the power of God in his ministry. AND he would carry letters of recommendation, most likely from the Jewish leaders of the church in Jerusalem.

In response to his opponents, Paul feels obliged to point out that his ministry does not lack the characteristics they claimed were necessary to prove apostleship, like signs and wonders, authority, knowledge and evidence of the power of God in his ministry. However, he rejects the whole triumphalist approach to evaluating apostleship. For him, the marks of true apostolic ministry were its fruit and the way it was carried out, i.e. in accordance with the meekness and gentleness of Christ, and sharing in his sufferings. True apostles of Christ would manifest not only the power of the risen Lord, but also the weakness in which Christ was crucified.

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So, we are presented with two very different ways of evaluating authentic ministry. The triumphalist approach stressed manifestation of power and authority and has no place for weakness and suffering. The other, while affirming the importance of power and authority, insists that these do not belong to the apostle himself [we saw this in verses 5 and 6 in which Paul talks about competence] but depend on the activity of God who chooses to show forth divine power through the weakness of fallible humans and through the apparent folly of preaching the gospel. As with so many things in the life of faith it is not an either/or but a both/and. Strength in weakness, life in death and power in powerlessness.

Questions

These interlinked themes of letters of recommendation, competence and standards for judging authentic ministry raise some pertinent questions for us.

It's a somewhat sobering exercise to compare ourselves with Paul's list of qualities of authentic ministry. How do we match up, what are the fruits of our lives and ministry?

No, we are not apostles but we are disciples or followers of Jesus the Christ and the same Holy Spirit who empowered Paul and Timothy for their ministry of preaching, teaching and planting new churches can empower each of us for the ministry to which God calls us. I suspect that many of us judge ourselves by the standards of the triumphalist approach, of Paul's opponents. We think we are supposed to be personally impressive and good public speakers with a commanding presence and so on.

Because we feel we lack some or all of these we do not qualify for ministry of some kind. I suspect that we forget Christ whom we follow is one who said 'My strength is made perfect in your weakness.' We forget that the life of union with God is a 'both/and' experience and that sharing in Christ's suffering and weakness is as much a part of the process as sharing in his power.

So, how do we measure up, what are the fruits of our ministry and whose standards do we use to judge?

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An equally pertinent question is 'What kind of letter am I?'

We are supposed to be love letters from God to the world bringing good news of salvation and peace. In his sermon two weeks ago Nic reminded us that the task of the church is to carry on Christ's work of healing and reconciling the world to God. What kind of letter do you think you are?

At a funeral recently the preacher spoke with such honesty that made me want to applaud loudly. He talked not only about the loving and generous nature of the person who had died, but also about how difficult he could be sometimes. He described him as a 'gritty personality', the kind that isn't always comfortable to be with, who asks difficult questions and speaks out about things that need to be changed. He sounded to me like a both/and sort of person. I suspect that most of us are. I certainly am. Yes, I am sometimes a love letter. I can be and do all the good things I would like to do and be all the time, but that's not the case. My husband tells me sometimes that I am 'downright difficult', and I have to admit that Yes, sometimes I am! And sometimes, he is too!

However, I have no excuse for staying in this unredeemed state for the rest of my life and I am afraid I have to tell you that that you and Nic don't either!

The same Holy Spirit who wrote Apostle Paul's letter of recommendation in the hearts of the Corinthian converts works in us too. This same Spirit can provide the resources we need to embrace the 'both/and' nature of discipleship, bringing strength in weakness, power in powerlessness, equipping us and making us competent to carry out the ministry to which we are called.

The very same spirit that converted Paul himself can and does work in our hearts to bring healing and transformation of attitudes, beliefs and behaviour to make us more like the love letters we are supposed to be.

Hopefully, at our funerals someone will be able to say ‘Your very lives are a letter that anyone can read by just looking at you. Christ himself wrote it – not with ink, but with God’s living Spirit; not chiselled into stone but carved into human lives...’

Amen Lord, may it be so