

208 In Earthen Vessels

In our efforts to “stand up for Jesus” day by day, the theme of our past few Reflections, we follow in the well-beaten path of the apostles themselves. In II Corinthians Chapter 4.1-7 we are given a wonderful passage from the Holy Spirit through Paul, which serves as a reminder of what the Gospel is all about, and what “holding forth” this Gospel involves in practice.

“Therefore, seeing we have received this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not” (v 1, AV). Paul and his colleagues were no supermen gliding effortlessly along above the fray! (eg., Acts 18.5 & 9-10 among many others). Paul is always conscious of his God-given blessings – notably forgiveness and mercy – and his God-given responsibilities, so whatever may be the trials and setbacks, he “faints not”.

He keeps to a transparent approach – nothing hidden, dishonest, crafty or deceitful (v 2a). Instead he “manifests the truth” and commends himself to the consciences of his hearers in God’s sight. Here is the original WYSIWYG! – “what you see is what you get”. (v 2b).

Indeed if there is any “hiddenness” in the process of Gospel proclamation, this arises in those who are currently “lost”, in whom “the god of this world” has blinded their minds in unbelief in terms of their being confronted with the Person and work of Jesus Christ (vv 3-4). There is much for us to ponder in these few words.

Paul’s message is nothing about himself (v 5). Just so, neither are we to fall for the old mistake of our inadvertently proclaiming Us under the guise of proclaiming the Lord

Jesus. This reminds us of that common phrase of today – “Let me share my faith with you”. Now that is well-meant of course, but it isn’t actually MY faith at all! It is in fact THE Faith, which stands quite alone as objective Truth whether or not it happens to have any adherents. My only involvement is that by God’s pure grace I have been drawn into being a member of this Faith, and if we can bear this in mind it keeps the emphasis on The Faith and on its glorious central Figure, rather than on anything to do with the rest of us who will always be, in comparison, mere participants and not owners.

Then we are told of servanthood for Jesus’ sake (v 5b) - ever hard, and especially so in this age of push-and-shove, me-and-mine, “I’m-alright-Jack”. We think of the Lord’s example on so many occasions: the extraordinary circumstances surrounding His birth; at the last supper, His going round those disciples, slowly and very deliberately washing their tired, dirty feet – surely a startling “visual-aid” they would never forget; and then supremely undergoing that vile treatment and foul death as the Lamb of God, “to take away the sin of the world” (see John 1. 29 / Isaiah 52.13 – 53.12 (one of the most jaw-dropping passages of Scripture we have been given); the Gospel accounts of His betrayal, trial and death; Acts 2.21-47 / 4.8-21; Philippians 2.5-11; and many more). Jesus shows us what this “servanthood” should be all about for us; as the old hymn has it, “.... Him exalting, self-abasing - this is victory”.

Then we are reminded that the Gospel message is all about light shining out of darkness, at the command of God Himself (v 6a). It shines, by His choice and gift, in all Christ-accepting hearts, being nothing less than “the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (v 5b): God’s light shining in this world of darkness – what a message! - not only for this season of remembering Christ’s birth, but for every season that exists (John 1.1-14).

Finally for this time (v 7), the Holy Spirit tells us so beautifully through Paul that we ourselves are only the “earthen vessels” – rough and ready, practical, functional, and hardly noticed because of the priceless treasure that is held safely within! We are servants, earthen vessels, foot-soldiers, yet entrusted with the heavenly treasures of the Gospel and ever pointing to the glories of Jesus Christ, Immanuel, “God with us” (Isaiah 7.14 / Matthew 1.23).

One of the great ironies of the Christian Gospel is that these ordinary earthen vessels are deemed inexpressibly precious in God’s sight (eg., Romans 5.1-11 / 8.31-39 / I Peter 1.18-21 and 2.9-10). But for now, when it comes to our “standing up for Jesus”, we do well to remember that helpful old truth, “I’m just that earthen vessel, that kitchen pot – while the treasure Himself is Jesus Christ”.

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