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Paul must have felt at times, “Why do I bother?”! In the church at Corinth for example, he learned of splits among the members, with Paul, Apollos, Cephas and even Christ Himself having their own supporters (I Corinthians 1.11-13). Some at Corinth felt that Paul bullied them in his letters but was unimpressive when physically present with them (eg., I Corinthians 2.1-5), while others, at Corinth and elsewhere too, questioned his apostolic credentials (egs., I Corinthians 15.8-10 / Galatians 1.6,11-21).

So in II Corinthians Paul, knowing he has caused some upset in a previous letter to them, (egs., 2.1-4 & 7.8-10), emphasises that in truth he loves his fellow Christians in Corinth and only seeks their best (eg., 2.4). Then in II Corinthians 4.1 & 16, we read the telling little phrase, twice mentioned, “we faint not” (KJV) – a glimpse into Paul’s state of mind as he copes with the incessant pressures of the ministry entrusted to him, and an encouragement for the rest of us in our own Christian discipleship in these challenging days.

After 4.1, Paul emphasises how he and his companions “have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor corrupting the Word of God, but by the revelation of the truth commending ourselves to every conscience of men before God” (4.2, JPGreen Literal). In our own Christian lives we too are bidden to speak the truths of the Gospel in these straightforward terms, naturally, clearly and courteously, with no need for us “to dress things up” in a bid to make the message (or us!) more attractive or palatable. As one commentator has put it, “Some evangelists are prepared to be anything to anybody as long as they get somebody down to the front for something!”.

We remain sowers of the seed, and what happens to the seed after it is sown we leave to the Holy Spirit (egs., Luke 8.4-15 / John 16.7-11). Indeed we can be sure that much of the seed may apparently achieve nothing at all, at least at that time, “for the gospel is being hidden ... in the ones being lost, in whom the god of this age has blinded the thoughts of the unbelieving” (4.3-4, JPG Literal). This in itself is good reason for us “to faint not” when our own efforts to proclaim “Jesus Christ as Lord” may appear to be fruitless: at times Jesus found this, and His first disciples, and Paul and his companions, and so too we as well (egs., Matthew 7.13-15 / Luke 10.1-11 / John 6.66 / Acts 2.12-13 & 14.1-5 / etc). Like all those who have gone before, “we faint not”.

The Holy Spirit continues through Paul (II Corinthians 4.5-6, JPG Literal) - “For we do not proclaim ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves your slaves for the sake of Jesus, because God is the One saying, ‘Out of darkness Light shall shine, who shone in our hearts to give the brightness of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’”. Here is that crucial reminder that our witnessing for Christ is not about me or my church or my culture – it is about “Christ Jesus as Lord”, no more and no less.

We also note those blunt words – “and ourselves your slaves for the sake of Jesus” (4.5). The Greek word, “doulos”, means just that, a slave, (though in most English translations it is softened to read as a “servant”). We know from elsewhere that we

are “slaves” of God and of Christ (egs., Romans 6.22 / Ephesians 6.6), and here now in this II Corinthians 4 passage we are told we are also “slaves” of one another for the sake of Jesus: not easy! – for this reverses our natural tendency to ensure that Self comes first (egs., Matthew 20.20-21 / Luke 14.7-11).

Just as we have the lowly status of slaves, so too we have the lowly status of mere “earthen vessels” (4.7): not fancy, priceless porcelain vases, but run-of-the-mill, everyday, nothing-to-look-at working pots, just like dear old Paul himself! – “so that the excellence of the power may be of God, and not from us” (II Corinthians 4.7, JPG Literal). What a relief this is, just to be slaves, earthen vessels, foot-soldiers, yet spending our lives in the service of Almighty God Himself; and what a wonder it is that for “ordinaries” like us, “in due time, Christ died for the ungodly” (from Romans 5.6).

As II Corinthians 4.8-15 then goes on to make clear, Christian service can be tough, but ever-grounded in resurrection hope, divine grace and heartfelt thanksgiving, and all for the glory of God.

In the dogged footsteps of those who have gone before, we too have a Gospel to proclaim; we too preach Christ Jesus as Lord; and by God’s grace, we too shall “faint not”!

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