

2 Corinthians 1:1-11 – Comforted and comforting (Isaiah 40:25-31)
Christ in us, the hope of glory (Graham Cousins)
Sunday Evening 1 June 2008

If someone asked you to tell them what being a Christian is like – I wonder how you would reply. It's something that I'm sure we all pray that others will ask us – and we know that 1 Peter 3:15 says Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have, but if you are anything like me – well, I don't always have a clear idea of what I want to say! What would I want to say to someone who genuinely wanted to know?

Or maybe it's not someone else that's asking you – maybe it's a question you ask yourself. Maybe the Christian life hasn't panned out quite as you were expecting it to – and you start to ask 'why?'

One thing I am sure of, is that if I was asked that question, I'd want to tell the truth. I've known people who have been told how wonderful it is following Jesus, have committed their lives to him, and then have hit some sort of disaster in their life which has completely ruined their faith. Their problem was that the version of the gospel they had been told had been so strong on the benefits of salvation that they had believed that if they became a Christian, life would be plain sailing from then on. When it wasn't – they abandoned their new faith as a fraud.

If you do get asked that question – or if you are asking it yourself, then personal experience is a great way in. But actually, what defines the normal Christian life isn't just what I experience – it is how God describes it in his word. And over the next few Sundays we are going to be looking at Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, to see what it has to tell us about life as a Christian.

Paul didn't actually write this letter with that purpose. Just to get the background – Paul had founded the church in Corinth, and stayed there for 18 months, evangelising and discipling the new converts, but after he had moved on, problems started to appear. 1 Corinthians is the letter he wrote in response to what he had heard about the trouble there. A couple of years later he had to return to Corinth – what he later called a 'painful visit', to try to sort out these problems. It was a bit later again that Titus, who had stayed in Corinth, came back to Paul to say that things in the church there were much better – except for one issue. It seems that some other missionaries had come to Corinth, and were peddling a perversion of the good news, and that some of the church had been taken in by them. So Paul wrote again – to express how pleased he was that many of the problems were behind them, but also to defend himself and his gospel against these people who had infiltrated the church.

And that's why this is a good letter to look at, because in challenging these others, Paul lays down for us what the Christian life, and Christian ministry, really are like.

So let's begin with the opening section – READING 1

It's a wonderful passage, and I think it flags up for us three things about Christian ministry. And before you say – hey, I thought you were talking about the Christian

life generally, not just Christian ministry, the answer is that there is no Christian life without Christian ministry. If you are a Christian, you have been called to service. If someone asks you what it is like to be a Christian, one thing you can definitely tell them is that involves service. And Paul shows us here that Christian ministry is a life of pressure, a life of comfort, and a life of hope.

One of the most famous newspaper adverts reads like this: "Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in event of success." It was placed by Ernest Shackleton, recruiting men for his arctic expedition, and amazingly he still got some recruits!

Well, I suspect that Paul might have said something similar about Christian ministry! Because here in this passage, several times he talks about trouble, or hardship. But really, those words don't really do justice to what he is talking about. The word he uses most often is one which literally means 'to crush' - not just the ordinary troubles of life, but things which feel as if they are crushing us.

Of course everyone has trouble - Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upwards, or 'Everybody hurts.' But Paul is talking about the pressures that can weigh down on us as Christians - the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives - we suffer because we are Christians.

I had an e-mail on Wednesday from the Barnabas Trust, about something that happened in Indonesia on 2nd May. The mainly Christian village of Horale was attacked on the night of 2 May by a mob from the neighbouring village of Saleman which is predominantly Muslim. The Muslims burnt down 120 houses, three churches and the village school. Four Christians were killed and 56 wounded. Fifteen hectares of crops were destroyed as well as 20 fishing boats and 2 motor-cycles.

Praise God that we don't face anything quite like that in this country. But still there are pressures; sufferings, involved in serving Jesus.

It might be the suffering that comes from standing up for Christ in a difficult situation. Several years ago now a friend of mine, who was an accountant, got a job with a small building company. He discovered that they were using some rather creative accountancy to avoid tax, and when he spoke to the boss about it, he was told, 'yes - and you toe the line, or you are out.' And sure enough, Ken lost his job.

Or it might be the suffering that comes from longing to see your family and friends come to Christ, but constantly having your witness thrown back in your face.

Or it might be the pressure that comes from your ministry itself. I know that there have been times when I do feel crushed by the responsibilities, by the amount that needs to be done. And I know that isn't just something that clergy feel! When you've got a demanding job, it is draining to also give yourself to ministry.

Just look at what Paul says in v.8-9 - We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. He doesn't give us any details of what made them feel like that - most commentators think it is to do with the riots in Ephesus, which must have happened just before Paul wrote this letter. But actually - I don't need to know what made Paul feel so desperate. I'm just glad that someone as great as him could feel like that. Because it makes it a bit easier when I feel really weighed down in my ministry, to know that so did Paul.

So - the first characteristic of Christian ministry - is pressure. So - if someone asked you to tell them what being a Christian is like, you could reply - 'whew, it's really tough. At times it is crushing.'

And if you left it there, they would run away! But Paul doesn't leave it there. He is ruthlessly honest about the downside - but also gloriously honest about the upside. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles. If the Christian life was free from troubles, that would be a pointless statement - as it is I think it is one of the most wonderful descriptions of God in the Bible - he is the God of all comfort. So when we go through any of the things I've just talked about, we have a God who comforts us.

It struck me as I was thinking about this that there must be many Christians who have never experienced that wonderful truth, who have never know God comforting them. Why? Because at the first sign of the sort of trouble Paul talks about, they beat a hasty retreat. God can only comfort those who need it.

But when we do face persecution, or pressure, or any other trouble, because we are Christians, God comforts and encourages us. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. Paul uses the same word both times - the sufferings of Christ 'flow over' into our lives, the comfort of Christ 'flows over' into our lives. The more you suffer for Christ, the more he comforts you. In v.8 Paul talked about a pressure, suffering, more than he could endure. So how come he did endure? Because the God of comfort was at work, even in that desperate situation. So we can tell the person who is asking us what being a Christian is like that yes - there is pressure, but alongside that there is a real experience of God working for us.

But how? How does God comfort us? I think there are a couple of clues. First - I never talk about the Greek - but I'll make an exception here, because the word which Paul uses comes from parakletos. Paraklete - you might know that word? It is the name Jesus gave to the Holy Spirit - the comforter. So it seems to me that God comforts us through the Holy Spirit.

And how does the Holy Spirit work? Usually through other Christians - that's what ministry is all about. And you see it here - who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we have received from

God. Most often, when I have been going through it in ministry, and have then been aware of God's comfort, it has been because another Christian has come alongside me and ministered God's comfort to me. And that means that when I see another Christian suffering - I'll want to do the same for them.

There is another hint of that in v.10-11 - He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us with your prayers. The prayers of these Christian were all part of God's work in comforting Paul. And if that isn't a good reason to be at the prayer meeting on Wednesday night, I don't know what is!

Christian ministry, and the Christian life generally, is a life of pressure, and a life of comfort. And finally, it is a life of hope. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us with your prayers.

On him we have set our hope. And of course, 'hope' is one of those words which in general use means almost exactly the opposite to what it means in the Bible. If you use the word hope in conversation tomorrow - it will probably mean that you are uncertain about something.

I hope that book I ordered arrives today = I really need it to arrive today, but you know what the post is like!

I hope that Tranmere get promoted next season = It would be nice, but I doubt it will happen.

I hope this bus is going to Birkenhead = I think it is but I'm not sure

I hope I win the lottery = Pigs might fly

I hope I stay fit and well = I feel O.K. at the moment - but you never can tell.

So when Paul says On him we have set our hope we might think that he means - it would be nice if God helps us, but I don't expect he will! But that is not what Paul means. In the Bible, hope is something that you can be sure of. In 2 Cor.3 Paul talks about the confidence we can have before God, and then says therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. It is a hope that is so certain that it can give us courage. 1 Peter 1:3 says Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The hope we have as Christians is a living hope.

And then in Romans 15:13 - May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. We can have joy and peace because we can depend on God's promises - the hope he has given us.

On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us. When we do face hardship and trouble - that pressure which Paul talks about here, we don't just have comfort in the trouble, we have a hope that we will be rescued from it. It might be that God will intervene to help us, just as he did for Paul. But, of course, Paul knew that the time would come when God would not rescue him in that way - tradition has it that Paul was martyred for his faith, and that is certainly what he was expecting when he wrote 2 Timothy - his last letter. 2 Tim 3:18 - The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack And bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. The hope Paul had didn't mean that he would always be rescued from trouble here and now. It means that that trouble could never separate him from the Lord Jesus.

And that is the hope that we can have - even when we are facing the pressure of discipleship. It's the hope that Isaiah talked about in our second reading.

READING 2

What is the Christian life meant to be like? It is a life of pressure - and if, tonight you are feeling under that pressure - it doesn't mean that something has gone wrong - just the opposite.

It is a life of comfort - in fact it is only when you are willing to accept the pressure that you can know God's comfort - and it is only when you know that comfort yourself that you can minister it to others.

And it is a life with hope. No matter what does happen in the here and now, God has your future in his hands.