

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sermon for 10am Service 14th June 2015

2 Corinthians 5.6-10 and 14-17
Mark 4.26-34

Sermon

"We walk by faith, not by sight." Paul offers Christians a different way of seeing life and the world. And Jesus does the same when he speaks in parables. Jesus' parables seem simpler than Paul's complex arguments, but both have far-reaching implications because they present a reality that is completely different from what we might call the world's *"virtual reality"*.¹ The dissonance between the ways of God's kingdom and the ways of the world can make Christian living confusing and uncomfortable 'though. So what does it mean to say *"from now on...we regard no one from a human point of view"*? Not just theoretically, but in real life, in relation to the big issues? Things like immigration, unemployment, and the rationing of health care services? I don't really need to say that living the reality of God's kingdom isn't simple. We all know. So I wonder what encouragement we can find in these words of Jesus and Paul.

This week, I've read a review of a book called *"The Road to Character"*, and I think it helps us translate today's readings for our time. It's by David Brooks, an American author, columnist and broadcaster. In it, he compares *"resume virtues"* with *"eulogy virtues."* Resume virtues are the virtues nurtured by the world. They go on CVs. They're self-orientated. They're about improving, succeeding and achieving security, about impressing people, and cultivating relationships that enable us to get on in our chosen careers, and be appropriately rewarded. Brooks says resume virtues are utilitarian, logical and rooted in economics, and while contemporary culture promotes them, it is *"inarticulate about how to cultivate inner life."* Our inner lives are central to eulogy virtues. They're the things people will say about us at our funeral. The things they identify as central to our characters. They're the things that are at the core of our being. Our moral values, the relationships we have with others, as well as the way we relate to the wider world. Brooks is inspired by people whose lives are rooted in eulogy virtues. They *"seem to possess an impressive inner cohesion. They are not leading fragmented...lives... They are calm, settled and rooted. They are not blown of course by storms. They don't crumble in adversity. They are consistent and their hearts dependable. Their virtues are... the ripening virtues you see in people who have lived a little and have learnt from joy and pain."*

I think this helps us get closer to what our readings mean. Those who live by these virtues walk by faith, not sight, and they accept the ways of the Kingdom of God. They willingly accept that they don't know how the seed grows, but that in God's providence it does, and so harvest it when it's ripe. They have confidence that God's ways are wise. Let's not pretend it's easy 'though. Jane Williams says this in her reflections on today's readings. *"One of the things that makes negotiating this new Christian world particularly difficult is that our bodies are obstinately stuck in the old reality. They insist on seeing with old eyes, and on wanting the kind of comfort and security that they were always used to seeing."* Paul knows this too, but he never says our bodily needs are wicked, nor does he make a simple division between body

¹ Jane Williams *Lectionary reflections Years A, B and C* (SPCK 2011)

and spirit. Instead, he encourages those who are in Christ to have confidence that while our bodies live in a world of compromise and are wasting away, their inner life - the life of faith that grows hidden from view – is being renewed. He offers the Christians in Corinth a way of living that is different from those who are not in Christ. Ways of living that aren't dis-similar to David Brooks' eulogy virtues.

First, he says, learn not to only trust what we see and want and will. The desire of those who are being made new in Christ, should be to love God and our neighbours, as ourselves. The horizon we live by is no longer our needs and desires. God's kingdom, and the final judgement, is what should determine our actions. I want to say a little about judgement before I continue. The early Christians expected Jesus to return and judge "*what has been done in the body*" within their lifetime. This colours all of Paul's writings. But his view of judgement is, far from the smell of sulphur, and screaming of condemned people. He knows God loves everyone. So he doesn't stoop to fear-mongering. "*The love of God urges us on*" he says. 'Though any good we do, is because God's Spirit is renewing our spirit, as we become new creations.

This leads us to his second point. Those who are a new creation judge differently and by completely different criteria. Love and love alone is God's perspective. "*From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view.*" Last week I said that some in the church in Corinth had been judging Paul. They preferred the teaching of other itinerant preachers. The reasons they didn't like his, was that he wasn't a particularly impressive speaker, and he didn't fall into ecstatic fits to lead his congregations into a frenzy of worship. Most of the time, all he did, was write letters. Nor did they like the fact that he was afflicted with what he calls thorn in the flesh. Their culture valued the riches, success, perfection that led to power and status, not disability or weakness. Not unlike ours. Regarding no one from a human point of view, is an invitation to let go of these resume values, and embrace the paradox that God's Spirit works in and through weak and vulnerable clay jars and broken vessels. This has challenging implications for the ways we see those the world believes threaten it or fleeces it. Whether they're immigrants seeking safety in Europe, Malaysia and Australia, unemployed people in our country, or those experiencing rationing of health care because they smoke or are overweight. But it also affects the way we relate to them. And whether we'll exclude them or ask what they have to teach us about the values of God's kingdom.

And this leads me into Paul's third point. He'd once thought Christians so wrong, that he persecuted them, using force. It's a very human response. And it's the response of many of those who live in the virtual reality we call the world, where resources are scarce, and we have to fight each other for them. Paul's conversion turned his world upside down. He was persuaded that in God's kingdom, no one can be excluded, because Christ died for all. God's desire is to bring people in not keep them out, and "*those who try to walk by faith and not by sight, have to do the same.*"² In the verses following our reading, Paul says Jesus' disciples are "*ambassadors for Christ*", with a "*ministry of reconciliation.*" For if God did not judge us, and count our trespasses against us, nor should we.

In God's kingdom, God's reality, the place where Christians are, the main currency is forgiveness. Economics, utilitarianism, logic are the virtual world's currencies. Love, graciousness, forgiveness, a refusal to exclude and a willingness to live with trust and "not

knowing” are the currencies of God’s Kingdom’s. Living like this sounds huge. Yet all that is asked of us is we do it each day. For in God’s kingdom things as small as mustard seeds are transformed into *“the greatest of shrubs, and...large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”* At the beginning of his book David Brooks explains why he wrote it. One day, not soon after writing a column about his frustration that education systems are unable to teach people how to be good, he received this email. *“The heart cannot be taught in a classroom intellectually... Good, wise hearts are obtained through lifetimes of diligent effort to dig deeply within and heal lifetimes of scars... You can’t email it or tweet it. It has to be discovered within the depths of one’s own heart when a person is finally ready to go looking for it, and not before. The job of a wise person is to swallow the frustration and just go on setting an example of caring and digging and diligence in their own lives. What a wise person teaches is the smallest part of what they give. The totality of their life, of the way they go about it in the smallest details, is what gets transmitted.”* *“We walk by faith, not by sight.”* Amen.

Sue Keegan von Allmen
14/6/2015