

PENWORTHAM UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

Sunday 4th February 2018

Readings: Mark 1:29–39; 1 Corinthians 9:16–23

Sermon

How do we share the gospel?

In our two readings we have different approaches.

Mark tells us of Jesus, who after he has taught in the synagogue at Capernaum is surrounded by people seeking his healing. Early in the morning he goes off by himself for some peace and to pray, and when he returns the disciples are lining up more people to be healed. But Jesus tells them they need to move on, he needs to share the message with others.

Jesus starts by teaching, crowds come to be healed, but Jesus wants to get back to sharing the message.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthian church, instead of a story about sharing the gospel, we have a justification for Paul's way of doing it.

Paul declares that he has made himself a slave to the gospel, to give the message the primacy. Some in the Corinthian church are questioning whether he is a 'proper' apostle because he doesn't ask a living off them.

This is tied up with all the social expectations of patronage, of the wealthy competing with each other by spending their money on worthy causes. Paul rejects this as he feels it hinders the gospel. He declares that he has a right to be supported, but he'd rather support himself by mending and making tents than be a burden to them.

I guess this expectation still exists in places within the wider Church, but I don't think any URC would argue if a non-stipendiary minister offered to join with them.

Paul then goes on to describe the lengths he will go to in service of the gospel. To share the gospel with Jews he would observe all of the laws and customs of his heritage.

To share the gospel with non-Jews he would set them aside and behave in ways that were normal to non-Jews but where reprehensible in the eyes of fellow Jews. He became 'all things to all people' for the sake of the gospel.

Paul is equally willing to either rigidly adhere to religious convention or to completely ignore it, in order to share the gospel.

Both of these passages raise questions about what is important. Jesus walks away from healing crowds of the sick and possessed in order to share the message elsewhere. Paul risks his reputation and well-being to ensure that the message is heard.

Jesus could have set up shop in Capernaum, let the sick and ailing from miles around come to him, and become the pre-eminent healer of his generation. He could have changed thousands of lives, brought joy to so many families, been able to provide for his family and friends, but he gave primacy to the message.

He chose a wandering existence, relying on the goodwill of strangers, and speaking words that challenged authority, rather than compromising the message.

Paul could have become a 'kept' apostle. Cared for by the wealthy and influential. Speaking at all the right gatherings. Observing all the correct practices and honouring his heritage. But instead he chose to support himself, and do all that he could, whatever the consequences, to ensure that the message was heard.

So, what is hindering each of you, and together as Penwortham URC, from sharing the message?

What are the compromises, distractions, or rationalisations that get in the way of the message?

I guess one problem is that we have inherited a situation where the means and the message are so tangled together we can't see the differences. The message gets abbreviated to 'come to church', but coming to church is 99% means.

How we do Sunday mornings, social events, support each other, discussion groups, and engage with our community – most of that is 'means'.

They are things we do, which we hope in some way reflect the message. But we have to accept that at times they may hinder it.

Paul stepped away from his heritage so that he was able to engage with people outside of it. Do we need to do the same?

What we also need to do is work out what the message is. We assume that everyone else is clear on what the message is, and it's only us who are a bit hazy about it. We have a general idea of what it is, but we would be hard pressed to come up with a concise and clear way of expressing it.

Each of us will have our own responses as to what the good news is. Each will have things in common with other Christians and people of good intent, some will be deeply personal, and an element will have grown out of your experience of living out your faith within this fellowship.

By drawing these all together we can bind a common one as Penwortham URC. Then, when we have a message to declare, we can look at the things we do and see how they help or hinder that message.

Both of our readings today have emphasised that it is the message that has the primacy. How it is shared, how it is expressed, and how it is lived out is secondary.

We do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that we may share in its blessings. **Amen**