



## sword and shield required

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If there's a person in the Bible who gets a really bad press from some contemporary Christians, then it's probably St Paul. If I asked you what you knew about him, top 3 or 4 things – you might say, along with many other 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians .....

He didn't like women, he seems to have been against sex in general, and homosexuality in particular, he supported slavery, and he took the rather beautiful and simple teaching of Jesus and turned it into a Greek-infused philosophy that created an institution that Christ never really intended. In short, you could blame him for much of the more oppressive aspects of the Christian religion – and so, really, we're not that keen. We prefer a parable. His letters are a bit mean.

Today we heard one part of Paul's writing that has sometimes been problematic – and so it's that part of Scripture that is likely to hold some challenge and some truth for us, if we can hear it with fresh ears.

The letter to Christians in Ephesus was written by Paul from his prison in Rome. Or it might have been collated after his execution by one of his followers who put his teachings together posthumously. Either way, the letter has two preoccupations which can be expressed in the form of two questions;

What is your identity?

Therefore how should you behave?

But first it might help us to reflect a little on who Paul himself was: the person behind the words.

Paul was a Roman citizen and a Jew from Tarsus (south east Turkey) which was a major trading city – also incidentally where Antony first met Cleopatra.....

Paul is probably from the entrepreneurial class – and from a pretty advanced city, which had paved streets, baths, amphitheatres. A city of culture and commerce. Paul is an sophisticated urbanite (not unlike many of the congregation at St James's Piccadilly..... (!?)) If any of the Biblical characters would have been part of a so-called "liberal metropolitan elite", it's Paul. He lives though in a binary world, where identity was very important and largely fixed. Citizen or migrant? Free person or slave? Jew or Gentile? Pharisee or Sadducee? Woman or man?

Paul was probably a very similar age to Jesus, perhaps a little younger. From some clues in his letter to the Corinthians, where he writes about widowers, it's probable that he himself is a widower when we meet him – and he doesn't have a wife on his extensive travels, unlike the other male apostles. He had uncertain health. Some scholars have, again piecing together comments he makes, suggested that he had epilepsy. There are other clues to suggest that he had one of the very common eye diseases carried by parasites in the Middle East. Whether it was epilepsy or an eye disease or whatever his condition, he at the time, found his ongoing poor health condition humiliating and restricting and it often seemed to get in the way of his work, which he found frustrating.

His personality? Passionate, highly strung; not a very impressive public speaker. There's that lovely detail in Acts where Paul has been going on for so long in a crowded house that one of the audience drops off and falls out of the window sill they're sitting on.

Sometimes, again from his letters and the ways that they are framed, it seems he can at times be manipulative and possessive.

He lets his anger out quite frequently. As Rowan Williams comments *beginning a chapter in his letter to the Galatians with "you idiots" is hardly likely to endear him to them* Rowan Williams Meeting God in Paul p 19

But that passion and anger is most often turned against people in power when they are abusing those who are weaker than them. He can be bitingly sarcastic in his kind of screaming at people to wake up and take themselves more seriously, take themselves as people who deserve to be treated well. I love this part of his second letter to the Corinthians, almost begging them to have more sense of themselves, more self respect.

*For you gladly put up with fools, being wise yourselves! For you put up with it when someone makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or gives you a slap in the face.*

He goes on – *would you like me to treat you like that? Well I'm sorry I can't – I'm just not strong enough.....*

So much for the person himself. But for us, a really important point when we're reading St Paul.

He didn't know that he was writing the Bible. (cf Rowan Williams Meeting God in Paul)

He didn't sit down to write infallible sentences that would be bowed at by centuries of believers to come. Importantly, this fact *doesn't make his writing any less Scripture to us* – more of that later – but he is writing passionately, sometimes contradicting himself a little, sometimes making a mistake with the Greek grammar. But his central purpose – and that's what I mean by taking this seriously as Scripture -his

central purpose is *grappling with, wrestling with, his own life experience as lived alive to the presence and purposes of God*. Of course he's passionate; he's desperate to communicate what is a radically different, radically new inclusiveness as a result of Christ's resurrection. He's insisting that the movement he used to persecute, the people he used to pursue, have grasped hold of something revolutionary that is rooted in love, forgiveness, creativity; and the story of Christ; a story of life, death, life – that is liberty itself.

And so acknowledging his passion and sometimes his contradiction, his context - doesn't mean to say that it's not Scripture for us – but it does mean we must take our context and his seriously if we're not to turn his personal and vivid encouragements, comments and quips into what some use today as "clobber texts".

I used to teach feminist and womanist theology to men and women training for ordination here in London. I would start the class by having a slide up on the screen; a quotation from Paul's letter to Timothy. "I do not permit a woman to teach a man". I just left it there and began the class. After a while, I would ask why no one had yet left the class, as we were clearly contradicting an instruction from the Bible. It was a little high risk as a strategy as I suppose someone could have walked out, but in the years that I taught the session to Christian men and women from all backgrounds and traditions, no one did. It gave us a chance in the room, to talk about interpretation.

James Allison, the Catholic theologian, has coined the phrase "clobber texts". One liners barked out when we are frightened, which have the effect of clobbering someone else to prove that we're right. "I do not permit women to speak in church". "slaves obey your masters" "men commit shameless acts with men". All "clobber texts" that are misused to prove a power play today.

But allowing Scripture the power that it has to change lives in real life, isn't just about knowing more about the person who wrote it

or the context in which it was created. Scripture becomes Scripture when your story and my story – of our lives as we're living them – come close to, intertwine with, fuse with, the Scriptural story.

And so I offer you these final reflections as a way that Paul's amazing poetic and passionate Scripture became real for me this week.

This week, I went to speak to a group of workers at a housing association. There were case workers, housing officers, area managers. One woman told me that she had spent the morning visiting someone in a property on one of their estates which had been simply taken over by a gang, after one of the teenagers had refused to help the gang any longer by delivering packages for them. Under threat for their lives, and with one member of the family already with broken legs, this case worker was working to move the family urgently to another property to give them a chance for a fresh start. Another told me of wellbeing classes they were organising on another housing estate. It had been incredibly difficult to persuade residents to come to a meeting, and it took four separate invitations by leaflet, poster, text and phone call, but the courses were going well, and people were meeting neighbours they had never met. It was a staff group who were gathering for their regular LGBT meeting – and I was there as a guest speaker to talk about faith and sexuality, especially with relation to their own tenants – how they could support them - and to get them to discuss it themselves. Several of the staff group had themselves been brought up in the church but hadn't gone for 20 or 30 years because of the church's teaching as they had experienced it.

We got on to the very point that I've been discussing so far with relation to Paul's writing. Because they often had to implement policy, cite rules, judge how far to bend the policy, or challenge it, with regard to housing and tenancies, often with very vulnerable clients and families, they talked movingly about the exercise of compassion in their jobs – knowing when to interpret and

accept the person in front of you. They discussed for themselves the challenge of not becoming fearfully focussed on the letter of the law but interpreting the words in the spirit of humanity and with a resolution to be kind.

We talked about how the Bible can be used in that way too: as I mentioned before – Scripture which is so varied and multi layered and beautiful, becoming a set of “clobber texts”, like a policy document where the letter of the law is more important than the humanity of the people dealing with it.

Our first reading for today was from the end of Paul's letter to Christians in Ephesus. I've not usually been very keen on the military imagery. I've been a bit sniffy about the breastplates and shield, sword and helmet. It all sounds a bit too bellicose; and armed with post-colonial guilt, reminds me of the Crusades. But as I read Paul's words, I thought that this challenge is potent for us, even if the imagery feels distant. Because the question becomes: for whom is this Scripture written? Paul himself was writing to a people who were suffering and afraid. And so with their ears, I heard this Scripture afresh.

I remembered the teenager with broken legs and a family being moved to a new estate. Quite often, the case worker said, in her experience, people moved on but then got themselves into a similar position in their new place.

I remembered at that same LGBT meeting listening to stories of people present in the room – and also their clients – getting incredibly anxious when the gasman visited or the telephone engineer in case they would see that they were gay. I heard their stories of putting photographs away, taking books off the shelves, so that they wouldn't have to worry about what the visitor thought of them and take the risk that they might gossip to the neighbours.

I remembered a woman I spent time with this week whose husband has just died, in distress and in pain, after 39 years of marriage. She had to take the decision to

switch off his life support machine. She is bewildered and lonely after his body has been repatriated to their native Uganda: I was grateful that her eyesight is so poor that as she spoke with such dignity in her grief, she couldn't see me crying.

I remembered a young Ghanaian man speaking with immense dignity and emotion to Liberal Democrat policy advisors here on Tuesday night, asking why in all his immigration interviews, it is presumed first of all by hostile questioners, that he is a liar. I heard his voice trembling as he asked only for what he said was simple humanity, not afforded him so far.

I remembered too the times when I am consumed by anxiety— about what life is for, whether I'm doing it right, what I'm worth— and what you think of me.

And I wished with all my heart for all these people, as Paul wished for the persecuted and afraid people he was writing to — that they can learn to “stand firm” in who they are; resist the drug dealers' demand for cooperation, resist the consuming shame that makes them turn the picture of their beloved partner to the wall. I wanted for the widow I met that she might have a shield of faith, that would quench the flaming arrows of grief, which are threatening to burn her alive. I wished such a shield for the young man who raised his voice even within our government's hostile environment for migrants, I wished with all my heart for all of them, the healing cuts of the sword of the Spirit, which like the knife of a surgeon, will cut out the cancer of self-blame, shame and fear; and will, by God's grace, forge a

breastplate which gives them the dignity of courage and a passion for righteousness.

Because this Scripture is for us; the walking wounded. We may not be enlisted into an army, but we know we have scars from the battles we fight, and we will have more wounds if we are doing life right, if we are living a Christ-shaped life: Christ whose wounds were inflicted by people consumed by their fearful, toxic abuse of power.

And as Paul encourages us elsewhere, this Christ-shaped life of faith is rooted in love — which he says in one of his other letters - is patient and kind. A revolutionary patience. An irreducible kindness. Not only to others but to ourselves. A patient and kind love, taught to us by the life of Jesus, that in the end is our best defence against the fear.

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The anti apartheid campaigner Alan Paton had one of the characters in his novels say this, and it is with these words that I end.

*“When I get up there to heaven— which I fully intend to do — God will say “where are your wounds?” And if I say I haven't got any, he will say “was there nothing worth fighting for?”*