

**Sermon by the Revd Canon Andy Lines, Mission Director of Crosslinks, at the
Consecration of the Revd Ferran Glenfield as Bishop of Kilmore, Elphin & Ardagh**

2 Corinthians 4:1-10

Bishop Paul Barnett states that 2 Corinthians is ‘important for its magnificent theological message that the power of God is brought to bear on man, not in man’s power, but in his weakness’ – something that is of huge encouragement to me as I feel even more ill-equipped to preach in this context than I usually feel elsewhere, but as Paul tells the Corinthians in his first letter: *God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing the things that are, so that no-one might boast in the presence of God.* Barnett goes on to emphasise that ‘establishing true criteria for genuine Christian ministry is one of the major contributions of this letter’ – that’s what makes this passage, where Paul defends his ministry and conduct, and we look over his shoulder as he does so, so appropriate for Ferran as he begins a different sphere of service.

What then are some of the features of this ministry that Paul draws out and which need to mark Ferran as a bishop in the Church of Ireland? I will do this by asking questions of the first paragraph of the text, so it’s good to keep it open in front of us in the order of service:

Ferran: who are you?

Answer: You are a recipient of God’s mercy. One of the huge differences between Christianity and other world religions and world views is the difference between mercy and merit. Merit emphasises what we deserve and is the basis of human religious creations, whilst mercy emphasises what we do not deserve. It was said that a mother approached Napoleon asking for a pardon for her son. The emperor stated that the young man had committed a certain offence twice and that justice demanded the death sentence. The mother responded: ‘But I do not ask for justice, I plead for mercy’ – ‘Your son does not deserve mercy.’ – ‘Sir, it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for.’ – ‘Well then I will have mercy.’ And he spared the son. As Christians we have received mercy, completely undeserved. Ferran, *you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived ... but God who is rich in mercy out of the great love with which he loved us ... made us alive.* There was nothing that you did and nothing that you can do to earn his favour – he has given it to you in his mercy – that should keep you humble. I once told a Christian friend that I thought I had a problem with pride – his answer incredible: ‘What have you got to be proud of?!’

But you are *also a recipient of the ministry of the gospel by the mercy of God*, as opposed to the ministry that his opponents were engaged in, the subject of the previous chapter. Paul had a great sense of his apostolic ministry given to him by the mercy of God and that might exclude direct application to us but the context suggests a much wider application. So, Ferran, this ministry which you are about to embark on, as indeed the ones you are finishing in Hillsborough, and previously in Kill and Cork are given by God’s mercy – once again there is no room for boasting about a gift given in mercy – I dare say there will be days when you will be tempted to think more highly of yourself than you should, partly because people will look up to you and treat you with respect and honour – when that occurs then we need to remember that our ministry is a gift of God’s mercy, not because of any merit.

Ferran: In this ministry what must you renounce?

There are three things that you must renounce in the first two verses: *losing heart, the shameful things one hides, and practising cunning or falsifying the word of God*. There will be, as no doubt there have been, moments when you have been tempted *to lose heart* and it seems to have been a feature of the Apostle's ministry facing as he did such affliction and discouragement; when this happens you need to remember the immense privilege and trust that you have been given – it is indeed a great treasure even if in a jar of Episcopal clay.

Secondly, *The shameful things that one hides* or disgraceful, underhanded ways. These are the ways we may be tempted to use in order to get a hearing, perhaps through underplaying the cost of following Christ or of the seriousness of sin – we are tempted to downplay the seriousness of sin because we do not understand that the gravity of the offence is measured by the dignity of the person against whom it is committed – in other words, we do not appreciate the awesome greatness of God. If I insult you or offend you, uncertain reaction; if I did the same to a law enforcement officer then the reaction will be stronger; head of state, really serious. How about insulting, offending or just ignoring the Lord God Almighty? (That is effectively what sin is) ... that would be to downplay the seriousness of sin. No losing heart, no underhanded ways; and

Thirdly, *no distorting the word of God*. Paul was able to say to the Ephesian elders that he had not shrunk from declaring to them the whole purpose of God – he preached the whole gospel from the whole Bible to them. Not all of it was palatable or easy but the ministry of God's gospel requires complete integrity and honesty – there will be many temptations to leave the word of God, to, as I have sometimes heard, 'move on' from a simple biblical faith to see what is black and white actually as rather more complicated and nuanced – shortly you will be asked to declare that you believe and accept that the holy Scriptures as revealing all things necessary for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ – not for adding to or subtracting from.

Well, we have looked at *who you are: recipient of God's mercy and ministry*; we have seen the need *to renounce giving up, underhanded ways and distorting the word of God*; so to the third question:

Ferran: what do you need to be doing in your ministry?

Of course there will be many duties and responsibilities which will be expected of you or given to you as a bishop in the Church of Ireland but vs 2 underlines what must be at the core and must on no account be neglected: *but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God* – this equates to the declarations you will be asked to make: 'in your ministry will you expound the Scriptures and teach that doctrine?' In the Irish College of Preachers and as a pastor-teacher you will have been well aware of that focus and of the need for time to dedicate to preparation – I suspect that as bishop that will come under even greater pressure, yet to neglect that is serious.

I visit the Anglican Church of the Province of Myanmar regularly and understand that some ministers at theological college prepare 52 messages that then get repeated annually throughout their ministries – we may smile at that but it will be tempting for you (as for me) to rely on reworked material rather than as you will be asked to declare – that you will be diligent in prayer, in reading holy Scripture and in such studies that will deepen your faith and fit you to uphold the truth of the Gospel against error.

Of course public proclamation of the truth needs to be backed up by a life consistent with the gospel proclaimed – we all hate, and indeed there are few things more destructive to gospel witness than hypocrisy – so Paul instructs Timothy to look for people of godly lives to lead in the church with the one gifting required, that they must be able to teach – so you will be asked to declare that you will ‘strive to fashion your own life and that of your family according to the way of Christ’.

Well, we have looked at what must you renounce and what must you do but fourthly:

Ferran: What are you up against in this ministry?

(3-4) *Our gospel is veiled to those who are perishing ... the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.* Having spoken about the need to proclaim the whole counsel of God and not to distort the word of God we also need to recognise that however clearly and faithfully you may be in your gospel presentation it will still be rejected by many – why is that? Because Satan, the god of this age, has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that, even though you may proclaim it clearly and faithfully, they are kept from seeing the good news of the glory of Christ who is the image of God – unbelievers have their minds blinded and so, dare I say it, a significant part of your ministry, that will be unseen and unsung, will be the times you spend in prayer pleading that God the Holy Spirit will work. Because they are times that are unappreciated and not easily subject to appraisal in the busy life of a bishop; they will no doubt also be times which are easily neglected. So, Ferran, you need to remind yourself of what you are up against – and if you lose sight of the significance of this you only have to remember that the result of the devil’s work is that people are *perishing* – one well known preacher of the word at a civic ceremony with an awestruck assistant minister at his side, leant over and reminded his assistant that ‘they are all perishing; never forget it’ – and that is where humanity is unless something further happens. Jesus himself said that *‘Whoever disobeys the Son will not see life for the wrath of God remains on him’* – that will give a sense of urgency in prayer – and in the light of that realisation a fifth question:

Ferran: what therefore needs to happen?

A miracle seems to be clearly required. Vs 6 at the end of the paragraph: *‘For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness”, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.’* There needs to be a creation miracle like the creation of light to rescue the lost and perishing from the clutches of the god of this age – and that is precisely what had happened to Saul the persecutor on the Damascus Road when the Lord Jesus in mercy appeared to him and completely transformed him – that is what happened to me in a less dramatic but no less miraculous way when my blindness to the things of God was overturned by a great, sovereign and merciful God – that was required for you too and is the focus of Christian ministry, *treasure in clay jars so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.*

Final question:

Ferran: What is the essence of your Christian ministry?

Recognising what we are up against: blindness brought about by the god of this world – and what needs to happen: a miracle of the sovereign Lord – what is required of you as well as a preserved prayer life?

Vs 5 tells us: *'For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.'* Central to your Christian ministry is preaching – the gospel is good news that needs to be announced in our godless world – it is the way God has chosen to work his miracle not just on the Island of Ireland but to the ends of the earth – and what is the content of that preaching to be? Not ourselves – we do not preach about the clay pots but the treasure that they contain, Jesus Christ as Lord, with our role being slaves for Jesus' sake on behalf of others.

Conclusion

Nothing new here, things that you will have known and acted upon throughout your Christian discipleship, but things you and we always need to be reminded of:

Who are you? A recipient of God's mercy and a ministry.

What are you to renounce? Giving up/losing heart, underhand ways and distorting the word of God.

What must you do? Open statement of the truth with consistency of life commending yourself to conscience.

What are you up against? The god of this world blinding people's minds to the glorious truth about Jesus Christ with the end that they are lost for all eternity.

What therefore needs to happen? A miracle on a par with the creation miracle by God himself.

What in summary is the essence of your ministry? Proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord because you are His servant on behalf of the people of God.

Of course, these things are also things that you will need to be encouraging in the leaders of congregations in Kilmore, Elphin and Ardagh. That would be the greatest service you could render as you take up the responsibility as chief under shepherd for the people in the Diocese, both those currently active in the churches and those you hope to see won for Christ.

One final thought: you are actually, contrary to popular belief, actually heading downwards; you are being consecrated as a servant of the servants of the servants of the King!

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