

The Four Faces Of The Church: The Face On Display: 2 Cor 2:12-17

In 2 Corinthians 2:14 we find the Apostle Paul talking to the Corinthian Christians with joy about what God was always doing for him and those who worked with Him for the sake of the Gospel. And this is what he writes:-

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Him

He is using an illustration that all of his readers would instantly have recognized. A conquering king in those times would celebrate his victory by marching through the main street of his city with his loyal soldiers in full battle formation following him, dragging the captives from the battle in chains behind.

This says Paul is what God is constantly doing for us who serve Him in Christ. There is a continuous victory parade going on that celebrates the victory in Christ that every day is being won and we are part of it. And because we are part of that triumphal procession simply because we belong to Christ, so God uses us to spread every where the fragrance of the knowledge of Him.

The NIVR version puts it like this:

Give thanks to God! He always leads us in the winners' parade because we belong to Christ. Through us, God spreads the knowledge of Christ everywhere like perfume.

Now there were those in the Corinthian church who would have been surprised to hear Paul say that God constantly led Him in the winner's parade. They didn't support Paul or his teaching.

They knew that Paul was not always seen to be successful in his ministry. That he had been beaten, stoned, and rejected, and

often thrown out of different cities because of his preaching. They had heard about his several shipwrecks and other hardships and this suggested to some that the Lord was not with him, for if He was surely these bad things wouldn't have happened.

Indeed there was a group of those in the Corinthian church who condemned Paul as a false apostle on the grounds that such things would never have been the lot of one who really walked close to the Lord.

So what Paul is emphasizing here is that it is God who makes us effective, and such effectiveness cannot be measured on how smooth life is for us or how successful our ministry appears to others. And even though at times we may despair because so much seems to be going wrong and so little seems to be going right, God is proclaiming in heaven daily victories He is winning that unbeknown to us, we have a part in. We may judge, and sometimes quite harshly, the effectiveness of Christ's work in others or in ourselves. But the reality is that it is Christ who works, and He is doing more in our world right now than we would ever guess at.

Every day, says Paul, God is celebrating victories by His Spirit through His people, and the inference we can take from this is that if we belong to Jesus and as His church are enthusiastic for the growth of His Kingdom, then we are part of that celebration. God is triumphantly declaring victory after victory through Jesus Christ by His church on earth today and we have a part in that.

Now this is truly fantastic. It means that God's plan for His church is working. That constantly God through Christ is making inroads into the devil's territory. But surely what we all want to know is how can we be involved personally and as a fellowship in this?

And Paul answers that question with ease. It simply requires us understanding that we are to be the perfume of the knowledge of Jesus everywhere.

Now we all know that even a tiny spray of perfume can invade a space very quickly. Just the other day I was working in the church office and Judy walked in, and before I turned around to see her or she spoke to me I knew it was her there because I smelt her perfume and recognized it. And when she left it lingered.

And Paul's use of the expression perfume makes even more sense when we remember that knowledge here is more than just a record of facts and figures. It relates to a deep conviction of Christ that has changed our inner being and affected our lives deeply. So much so that when we are with others for any length of times they begin to see in us and hear from us the impact that Jesus has in our lives.

This is God's great Master plan says Paul. God draws us to Himself and places His Spirit or power within us. He enables us to know Christ deeply and be changed by that knowledge. Then through our lives He spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ alive in us. So we become the Face of the Church on Display.

But then Paul enlarges upon what this will mean in practice and introduces the cost of being this perfume, that is Christ in us. The cost of being the Church of Christ constantly on display. For he says in v15-16

For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other the fragrance of life.

J B Philips puts it this way in his paraphrase:

We Christians have the unmistakable "scent" of Christ, discernible alike to those who are being saved and to those who are heading for death. To the latter it seems like the very smell of doom, to the former it has the fresh fragrance of life itself.

When as a Christian we put Christ out there amongst people who have none or little interest in church, we will get mixed reaction. Sometimes aggressively against us and sometimes warm and receptive, and often at different levels in between.

We shouldn't be surprised at this or allow it to prevent us trying, for what Paul is saying is that there will always be the good and the bad reactions to us, but ultimately God knows the outcome. And He spreads us everywhere.

He won't just send us to receptive people for all need to hear. And just because we get an initial negative reaction does not mean that God is not working in that person's life.

So our responsibility is to constantly be out there as a sweet smelling fragrance for Christ, expecting it to be hard, but knowing that God has already won the victory and we are displaying His grace daily through our inner love and knowledge of Jesus, and our willingness to speak for Him when we can.

For such a responsibility we need daily preparation.

We need to look up each morning and seek God's enabling, guidance and protection

We need to look into His word and into our hearts so that we will be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in us.

And we need to look Beyond our fears and the rejections that could come to the Almighty purposes of Christ who has already planned for us to join Him in the greatest Victory Procession of all time.

To Him be the glory.