

Holmbury St. Mary 16th June 2024

Readings: 2 Corinthians 5: 6-21 Mark 4: 26-34

Paul's Goal – based on 2 Corinthians 5: 6-21

Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to them for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade people. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

So from now on we regard no-one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Prayer

What is your goal in life? The politicians crowding our airwaves have a clear goal – to improve the world – usually by remaking it in their own image. And they have a solid plan to do this: get elected to Parliament by persuading people to vote for them. Once in Parliament, more persuading to get other MPs to back them and their policies, and promote them to a senior role in government. Once there, they are confident that they will be able to bring about the changes they believe are needed.

In our first reading today Paul tells us that he has a goal – to please God. Although he is looking forward to going to be at home with the Lord, while he is still living in his old body he wants every breath to be about pleasing God.

That seems to me to be the right goal for every Christian. After all, whom do we want to please:

- Ourselves?
- Other people?
- Or God?

Pleasing Ourselves

Debbie and I have been away for the last week, and we enjoyed playing something called Adventure Golf. A bit like crazy golf, you use a putter on a small course. The trouble is that there are bunkers, water features, bridges and bushes in your way. The course is on the side of a steepish hill, and the lightest of touches on your ball can send it plummeting down several levels. Once on the green your troubles are not over. The greens have bumps and slopes and drainage holes. I call the latter “gravity wells” because they have a fatal attraction for golf balls, and if you miss the hole by a whisker your ball will keep rolling and rolling until it ends up back in the drainage hole where you started.

Our human nature seems to keep rolling us back to the same place – where all we want is to please ourselves. Comfort, pleasure, accumulation, security. And around us there are voices telling us that we are important, we deserve rest, we have earned this or that. As long as we aren't hurting others we can do whatever we want. I am sure that the desire to please ourselves is strong in all of us, and a big part of our lives. Giving sacrificially, offering our time freely, welcoming strangers, working for justice – none of these come easily.

Pleasing others is certainly not as selfish or hedonistic as pleasing myself. But it can also be dangerous to allow this to motivate you. Politicians may have worthwhile goals, but in order to get themselves elected, they frequently fall over backwards trying to please the voters. They present us with an image of themselves that is confident, decisive, knowledgeable. They make promises that will be almost impossible to keep should they get into power. They tell us things we want to hear.

But it's not just politicians and salespeople. I expect that we are all guilty of seeking to please others by trying to avoid upsetting apple carts and shying away from saying true things that we think will make people feel uncomfortable. We don't want to lose friends, or have people think badly about us.

Pleasing God

Paul says that his goal is to *please God*, and he wants his readers to make this their goal also. He gives two reasons in our passage.

Firstly, we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Paul says that we will have to give an account of “things done while in the body”. In a Roman city the judgment seat was in the town square, not hidden away in a court room. Legal cases were very public affairs. Paul has this in mind when he talks about the judgement seat of Christ. Everything we have done, said and thought will be laid bare. God sees the thoughts and motives behind all our actions, whether good or evil. If our motive is always to please God then we will have nothing to be ashamed about when we appear before the judgment seat of Christ.

The second reason Paul gives for his desire to please God, is Christ's love. He says "Christ's love compels us". Jesus died for each one of us. Not for some cause or theory, not because of Jewish treachery or Roman cruelty, nor even as the supreme example of self-sacrificing love - but so that we might die to our old lives and become brand new creations.

For those who have put their faith in the Lord Jesus, God no longer counts their sins against them. Although we will appear before the judgment seat of Christ, we can be sure that the verdict will be "Not guilty". Paul says in the last verse of our reading that God has transferred our sin onto Jesus: on the cross he became sin for us, and, in an amazing swap, we have become the righteousness of God.

So Paul wants to please God, on the one hand because he knows that that God sees everything and will call him to account, but on the other because he is filled with love, gratitude and wonder that Christ has set him free from the guilt and penalty of his evil deeds. So he wants to please God not from fear of punishment but from gratitude and love.

How do we Please God?

But what does it mean to live our lives to please God? For Paul it was about trying to persuade people to trust in Jesus. He saw himself as an ambassador of Christ – his job was to proclaim the message of reconciliation. God has come into the world in Christ, and through Christ He has made a way for people estranged from God to be reconciled again.

There are many different ways in which we can please God, so we won't all end up as clones. For example:

- By honouring and worshipping him with every part of our lives.
- By spending time with him and delighting in his presence
- By seeking to know him better, through studying the bible and prayer
- By understanding his will and trying our best to obey him in big things and small
- By helping others to discover his love for them
- By trying to become more like Jesus, day by day.

So what is your goal in life? Is it to live to please yourself, or to live to please God? Are you more concerned about what other people think, or about what God thinks? Do you feel the compelling love of Christ shaping your decisions, your actions, your whole life? Are you willing to be an ambassador for Him, sharing the message of reconciliation, helping others to be reconciled to God?

Closing Prayer

"Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised again." Lord Jesus, thank you for your death through which we have forgiveness and your resurrection through which we have new life. Help us to live no longer for ourselves, but for you. May our goal henceforth be to please God with every breath, with every thought, with every word and with every deed. Amen.