



2 Corinthians 1:12-24

I was once part of a church that had plans for a major building development. It needed it. The structure was a hundred years old and was the worse for wear. It no longer served the needs of the church fellowship.

Everyone was in favour of the change, except one man. We needed to do nothing, he argued. He had faithfully studied the prophetic scriptures and was certain Jesus' return was so imminent that we need not bother. In one sense we dismissed his view quickly, but in another, we asked ourselves the question; does God want us to do this? The urgent need suggested it but was what we had planned the best solution? We had our plans, but what about God's?

It was a good question to ask. We thought we had a plan that was financially sound but actually it did seem a bit ambitious. As we discerned God's will we realised that God wanted us to be ambitious - a massive step of faith was needed. Some were doubtful at what we had discerned but the Lord helped us along as the unambitious plan got torpedoed by the local planners.

The plan we ended up with seemed daunting, impossible even but the resources came in and we found God making possible what seemed impossible. The result was a building that was still much larger than the needs of the fellowship. It took five years then the congregation started to grow we saw why God forced us into the big dream. He had an even bigger one!

We like to stay in our comfort zones don't we. If we have plans, we want them to be reliable, predictable, reasonable, almost risk-free. My experience is that God wants us to take the risk of relying wholly on Him and let Him fire us with a vision and trust Him to provide the resources.

It goes the other way too. Sometimes God doesn't want us to do something that we were sure at one stage was right. Paul had plans to visit the Corinthians a second time. but then came the news. He knew that the plans had to change - the rebuke of his visit would have been too severe for them. He went elsewhere and they got the letter!

God wants us to make plans that are reasonable and spiritual and make sure that our yes is yes and our no is no. But sometimes however good OUR plans are, God had His own and we must trust and obey in that case because He is wiser.

The problem for Paul here was that the people felt let down when Paul failed to turn up and went elsewhere. In his God-given wisdom, Paul had bypassed them. The world these days is full of conspiracy theorists: people who look at a simple explanation and just don't believe it. They think there is a bigger picture – or more precisely a bigger conspiracy – something that people are not being told. I just love some conspiracy theories. They are so absurd, yet people still believe it. You can look on the internet and find a site that has photos that are supposed to show that men never landed on the moon, claims that Barack Obama is not a US citizen, that Bill Clinton assassinated a number of close aides (they died of natural causes), that a flying saucer landed at Roswell in 1947, that Princes Di was murdered and of course that Jesus married, had children who then emigrated to France. All these have one thing in common. They all do not pass muster on close examination, but that people still believe them because it suits them to for whatever prejudice or preconception they may hold.

And the conspiracy theorists in Corinth were having a field day on Paul. Actually he's accused of being or not being quite a few things in 2 Corinthians. Here's how Paul reacted to such people: *12 We are proud that our conscience assures us that our lives in this world, and especially our relations with you, have been ruled by God-given frankness and sincerity, by the power of God's grace, and not by human wisdom.*

Paul is a good role model when it comes to how we should relate to other people. He was a man whose conscience was clear and his approach to them is a model of how we should deal with one another if we are to do so in a spiritual way that is of a clear conscience. There are two elements to this:

- ***Being a person of integrity.*** Child behaviourists always encourage us to “say what we mean, and mean what we say”. As a result, our children always know where they are with us. It is the essence of good parenting and the essence of good relationships with others and with church. God calls us to be people of integrity, who deal with one another truthfully and frankly. One of the biggest issues in a church is when things that are meant to be confidential are made public and when things that are public are dealt with as confidential.
- ***Moving according to God's grace.*** God wants us to be people who are prompted by His Spirit and do as we are guided. I remember once that I was accused of something that I just hadn't done and I was being gossiped about. I didn't like that and I spoke to my Pastor's wife about it. She actually knew the truth of the situation: “do you have a clear conscience that you have behaved with integrity in this situation” I was asked. “Yes.” “Then in that case, the problem rests with them and not with you”. With Paul the problem did indeed rest with them and Paul's comments did not seem to be aimed at them, but at the persons that the conspiracy theories were trying to influence.

Paul does deal with the conspiracy theorists in this letter, but he encourages them to look carefully at his letters; there is no attempt to hide information in flowery words or dense concepts. His words are meant to be easy and straightforward: *we write to you only what you can read and understand. But even though you now understand us only in part, I hope that you will come to understand us completely, so that in the Day of our Lord Jesus you can be as proud of us as we shall be of you.*

Actually I can see his point here. Both Corinthian letters are meant to be clear and frank and if we read them in that way then what he's saying is obvious and down to earth. But we're not free of conspiracy theorists either. The words of the Corinthian letters, particularly the first are amongst the most hotly contested in the Christian faith. That's a pity because all the passages involved are amongst the most transparent and most powerful in the New Testament if Christians get a hold of them. People's inability to grasp them is usually because they are guilty of the same sins that the letters were written to solve!

My final thoughts this evening continuing on meaning what I say and saying what I mean. Look down as verse 17 *In planning this, did I appear fickle? When I make my plans, do I make them from selfish motives, ready to say “Yes, yes” and “No, no” at the same time? 18 As surely as God speaks the truth, my promise to you was not a “Yes” and a “No”. 19 For Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was preached among you by Silas, Timothy, and myself, is not one who is “Yes” and “No”. On the contrary, he is God's “Yes” 20 for it is he who is the “Yes” to all God's promises.*

The thing about integrity is that our yes must be yes. We mean what we say and say what we mean and don't change the words for our convenience. For our model we have Jesus. We don't have a God who's fickle and changes His mind as suits. In the religions of the time the gods there were always fickle and corrupt. It reflected in the way of life. It's still a bit like that today. It's the phenomenon of the white lie. We either don't tell somebody the truth or tell them a lie to “protect them”. I'm not a great adherent of the principle. I've had people before not tell me things because I might feel hurt. I tell you what, I feel more hurt by people not telling me and then finding out later.

In Jesus, we learn God's “yes”. We dealt with that this morning. We have a God who wants us to understand that we are the recipients to His promises. If we get our heads around who we are in Christ then we have in our possession life transforming words.. Let me read on.

21 It is God himself who makes us, together with you, sure of our life in union with Christ; it is God himself who has set us apart, 22 who has placed his mark of ownership upon us, and who has given us the Holy Spirit in our hearts as the guarantee of all that he has in store for us.

What I love about scripture is that it's filled with so many promises. God makes us sure of our life in union with Christ. How does He do that? By giving us the Holy Spirit in our hearts as the guarantee of all that He has in

store for us. It's what is truly definitive of the Christian faith. People see faith as risk. These days risk assessments are all the rage as people decide whether or not they are going to embark on something they think may have dangers in it. They do their risk assessments and decide what they will do.

That isn't what the Christian faith is about. God has given us proof that the step we've made in Christ – by giving His Spirit to us. The Spirit is the down payment, the guarantee statement of who we are and that all of God's promises are valid and correct. That's why it's so important that we are people of the Spirit and that we pray in the Spirit and walk in the Spirit. What's the point of a guarantee if we don't make use of it when doubts creep in, problems looms, discouragement arises, or when we feel crushed by our situation. The Holy Spirit is here. He reminds us of who we are in Christ. He is the God of rescue. He is the One who empowers us to be the people of God and guides us on our life's journey.

Holy Spirit, please fill us anew that we may realise that in the pain of discouragement, You rescue us, empower us and remind us of all whom we've become in Christ. Thank you that You walk with us day by day. May our lives reflect Jesus and may You use us to be people of integrity. Let our words always be words of honesty and sincerity. May our words and deeds be transparent so that we honour Jesus in word and deed. In His name. Amen.

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