

NEVER LOSE HEART

"For this reason we never become discouraged." (GNB)

"So we're not giving up." (Message)

"Therefore we do not lose heart." (NIV)

These are different Bible translations of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4:16

We never lose hope, says Paul.

Why would Paul even think of losing hope?

The church in Corinth was one of the very first churches. It was established by Paul himself on his travels and he stayed for nearly two years to watch it grow and take shape, before moving on to spread the word to other regions.

Corinth was a major city, a seaport, and the capital of the Roman province of Achaia, which meant that in the time of Paul, Corinth (and not Athens) was the most important city in Greece.

The book we have in our Bibles called 2 Corinthians is not really one letter but fragments of at least three different letters Paul wrote to that church, and what we see from 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians is that although there were great things to say about this congregation, there were also many problems.

The most obvious thing about the church were the divisions.

Different groups in the church rallied round different leaders and mentors and that led to factions.

There was division between those who displayed spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues and those who didn't. The first group considered themselves to be superior Christians.

There were divisions between the rich and the poor. Not many were rich, but they that were, tended to consider themselves more important.

The Communion meal (which really was an actual meal in those days), was something that the rich could arrive to early and claim the best food and drink while those who had to work would turn up in time for the leftovers.

There was sexual immorality in the church (including at least one case of incest), and it seemed like no one was prepared to deal with that.

And there were cases of church members dragging other members into the courts to settle disputes and arguments.

So not exactly running smoothly, then....

What is clear that the notion that *some* people have – that the early church was the real pure church, the church that got everything right – is a false notion.

Truth is there have always been difficulties problems and issues for the church to face – right from the beginning.

Despite all the problems it seems clear from the letters and fragments of letters that progress was made and the congregation at Corinth did begin to sort things out and things picked up.

Despite all the problems Paul believed that God could bring the church through the troubles. So he writes, *"We never lose heart."*

Why might **we** lose heart?

Are these words that we need to hear?

You might ask – am I kidding to ask that question?

Think about the church.

Numbers are down.

In 1956 the Church of Scotland had 1.3 million members.

Now we have 400,000.

There are more church people dying than coming to faith or joining a church.

Not many churches are growing.

Admittedly there are those who like to exaggerate the facts.

For example the other week a leading minister in the Free Church of Scotland was writing in the media about our denomination - making out things are worse than they are.

He quoted the story of one person who went to a Church of Scotland church where there was a membership of 2,000 and yet only 20 turned up to worship.

'There's the trouble with the Church of Scotland,' he said.

The only problem with that story is that its complete and utter tosh.

There isn't any Church of Scotland with a congregation of 2000.

There are only about 6 or 7 that have more than 1000 and none of them are going to have a worshipping congregation of 20.

But although there are those who love to exaggerate the truth, the facts are still pretty grim.

We live in an avowedly secular society. Faith in God is seen as not particularly normal and certainly not fashionable.

We live in a culture that has moved away from involvement in church. Life for most people revolves round other activities and pursuits.

Then there are church failings.

Child abuse is not just the preserve of the Catholic Church. The Methodist Church in Britain issued an apology to the world just the other week after it released its own report on the subject.

We live in a world where persecution is on the rise.

One of the many things that just happened to get posted to me is a magazine called the Barnabas Fund. It relates stories of Christian persecution across the world.

Now I have reservations about the magazine because I think that we should be concerned about all persecution and concerned about people everywhere no matter their faith. Barnabas only speaks of Christians.

But the fact remains that in the 20th century more Christians were martyred for their faith than all the previous centuries put together.

It was former Conservative peer, Baroness Warsi, herself a Muslim, that spoke out memorably last year and the year before against the persecution of Christians around the world saying that not enough concern is being shown. This was not long before she resigned from the government over their Middle East policies.

Today in the countries of the Middle East, the future of entire Christian communities continuing to exist there is hanging in the balance.

Then there is the propensity of the church to shoot itself in the foot.

We continue to argue on and on about the same issues like a stuck record.

Once again at the General Assembly a couple of weeks ago more time was spent in debating the gay issue than anything else.

It started well enough. On the first day it was agreed that congregations could decide for themselves whether to accept or reject a candidate who was in a civil partnership. But five days later the Church refused to accept that any congregation might call a minister who was in a same sex marriage. This issue needs to be discussed again at length by every Presbytery in the land. A year will pass before we get an answer.

Its time to accept that the churches are divided on this, that no side is going to win any time soon, and we just need to move on and give each other space.

Obviously as a congregation we feel strongly about the issue and we want everyone to be welcomed and included, but it's also time to stop arguing over this and find a way to move on accepting our differences.

(We already do that on a hundred other issues).

A couple of weeks ago some of us were returning in the bus from Faslane and there was a conversation going about sweets from the past.

I was reminded of something that happened when I was a wee boy. I was four years old and my dad was about to marry my step-mom. So I was sent off to stay with my gran and an aunt in Portobello.

Now they had a TV and in those days there was an advert for Milky Way.

"The sweet you can eat between meals without ruining your appetite."

Every time that advert came on TV my aunt and I had an argument. What was it the man was saying?

*"It's the sweet you **can't** eat between meals,"* I said

*"It's the sweet you **can** eat between meals,"* said my aunt.

We used to argue about it all the time – every time the advert came on TV.

Which was a lot...

It's can't.
 It's can.
 It's can't.
 It's can.....

Now obviously my aunt was totally right and I was totally wrong.
 (It wouldn't have been much of an advert if I had been right!)

But what strikes me as amazing was the extent to which my aunt just kept up arguing against me.
 She might have been right, but there was little point in arguing on and on. After all, I was only four.

This gay issue that the church keeps coming back to is one where people care about the outcome. I know I do.
 But its also time to get on with being the church and spending time on the central things of faith. Its time to stop arguing over and over again and accept that we have different beliefs on this.
 We need to move on and give each other space.

I should say that being at the General Assembly is a time when we become aware of all the good things that are happening and there are plenty of good things the church is saying and doing, (and I'm not even mentioning any of them today), but there are also plenty of reasons for concern.

I guess this has been a common theme for the church down through the years, starting as far back as the first communities that Paul helped to create.

So where was the reason for Paul's hope?

Paul's hope was placed in God who is always going to be right there with the church.
 Paul's hope was placed in God who will always be leading the church into a new future.

Bringing it up to date we could say that:
 Our hope today is placed in a God who is always going to be right there with the church.
 Our hope today is placed in God who will always be leading the church into a new future.

What can we say about God's future for the church?
 Is there anything we can predict?

IT WILL BE SOMETHING NEW

It won't be a going back to the old days.

As Paul says in verse 16 as we get older we won't be getting younger. We don't go back in time. Life moves on.

We won't be 21 again!
And it won't be 1956 again for the church either.

Anyone who imagines that the church is simply going to return to the old days is heading for disappointment.
That's not going to happen...

But this renewal has happened again and again throughout all of history.
God is always wanting to do a new thing – to lead us on to the next stage of our journey.

WHAT GOD BUILDS WILL NOT SIMPLY DEPEND ON OUR OWN RESOURCES

What do we need in our church?
Good leadership?
A powerful preacher?
Enthusiastic members?
Strong groups?
A lovely, open and friendly building?
Hard workers in our cause?

None of that is bad. All of that may help a lot, but it's not enough.

As Paul says in v7, we are just like common clay pots.
All that we are is nothing exceptional or out of the ordinary.
It's not us who will bless the church.

Our confidence has to be on God. God is the source of our hope.

But there is one final thing to say.

Although it is God that will lead the church forward, and it is not simply down to us working or praying harder, there **is** something that we can do.

WE CAN CHOOSE TO BE READY

It's not just about us, it's true. But this is also true. God chooses to work with and alongside us. God chooses to work alongside those who are willing to be God's partners in the world.

It is clear that some churches will have a future and some will not.
Some congregations as we know them now will not be here in 10 or 50 years time.

But other congregations will still very much be here.

And part of what will make the difference comes down to how we are and how we respond to God's leading.
And we can actually decide as a congregation which scenario is most likely for us.

Some people (particularly in their later years) may be tempted to say (or at least think privately) that their concern is for now.
"As long as the church survives a few more years and sees me out that will be okay."

Well, it **won't** be okay!

Because the point of church is not for it to be something just for us.
The point of the church is to grow into the shape that God wants it to be.

Our task (with God's help) is to build the church.
Our prayer must be that our church community is going to be strong and will have a future.

It begins with us all as individual people.
We must decide how important it is for us to continue to follow Christ – how committed we are to him.
And then together that will shape the direction of our church.

We can decide to put ourselves in a place where God can use us.
We can open ourselves up to God's leading.
We can determine to get involved in the life of our congregation through learning fellowship and service.
We can refuse to stagnate.
We can refuse to look inward at ourselves or back to another age.
We can open our eyes and ask God to help us see.
We can determine to be ready to follow where God is leading us.

Each congregation will decide how they respond to the challenges of current times.
My prayer for Langside is that together we will refuse to lose heart –
that instead we will say yes to God –
yes to being people that God can use –
and yes to becoming the church that God is calling us to be.

2 Corinthians 4:7-5:1

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