

2 Corinthian 4:1-6 – New Covenant Ministry

I have been preparing for a seminar for some of our leaders on developing a ministry philosophy - a set principles that guide their ministry. And I came across this lovely little saying about principles:

Methods are many
Principles are few
Methods always change
Principles never do

Quite a good thought about the guiding values and unchanging principles that drive our lives.

Our passage today, from 2 Corinthians 4 has Paul reflecting on the New Covenant ministry he has just been speaking about, and the nature of it. And in it he articulates a number of principles for the ministry of the church. Not methods that change, but principles that never do.

Across the Diocese of Tasmania, we have a Vision – to be a church for Tasmania, making disciples of Jesus. This is our ministry and with various local adaptations, it is the ministry calling of each of our churches including St George's Battery Point.

But what are the principles that drive what we do - principles that endure the test of time?

Today we are going to look at 4 principles for our Ministry as the church of God that emerge from 2 Corinthians 4, that come under 4 headings:

Ministry Framework
Ministry Means
Ministry Outcomes
Ministry Content

1. Ministry Framework – Mercy v 1

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart

The ministry that Paul is engaged in with the other apostles, and into which he invites us to join, is not his own ministry, but it is God's ministry given by his mercy.

Ministry is not about Paul, and it is not about me, and not about you, it is not St George's or the Diocese of Tasmania, but it is about God. And it is a gift of his mercy.

Mercy is gratuitous favour, his compassion, his long-suffering for us, his grace when we didn't deserve it, and it is by this, that he involves us in this ministry. From first to last it is a gift of God.

Isn't it amazing that God, chooses to use us, to be ministers of this new covenant?

God could do anything he liked to get to win the world. He could write his message in the sky, he could appear to every person and call them to repentance, he could use any method he likes, yet in his mercy and kindness, he chooses to give the ministry to the church, to the likes of Paul, and the likes of you and me to make his appeal to the world.

Ministry is tough! I reckon the work of the church in secular Australia, is harder now than it was when I first became a Christian 40 years ago. And it is easy to be discouraged, and to feel the burden and the weight of the unachievable task. And in our own strength it is pretty impossible.

But actually, it is all a gift. A gift of mercy.

And in v 1, Paul thinks this is reason enough for not losing heart. Not becoming discouraged. Knowing that God has given it to you.

I had a great colleague at one time, and whenever I was discouraged and weighted down by the work ahead of us, he would say to me – don't forget – "It's Jesus' Church."

And it's true and the ministry he gives us, belongs to him and is a gift of his mercy.

When we stop in a minute, I want to ask you to think what difference the Mercy framework makes to what God is calling St George's to do and to be?

First, Ministry Framework - Mercy

2. Ministry Means – Openness v 2

²We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

Paul begins this section with the negatives. He may be responding to criticisms that have been laid against him in Corinth, or the behaviour of others, so he begins by denouncing certain things.

Paul refused to be involved in shameful behaviour, things which need to be hidden in secret. He is not involved in trickery or falsifying the word of God. (The word means "diluting" or "watering down"). Paul is not one to twist the plain meaning of the Bible, like the "peddlers of God's word" in 2:17.

No - Paul says - his motives are much more transparent than that - by the open statement of the truth he commend himself to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

Paul is the champion of integrity in ministry. He's not doing it for himself or to manipulate. His open statement of the truth is unguarded simplicity. He states it plainly and simply for all to see and hear.

You don't have to look too far today to find people who dilute the gospel message – avoiding teaching about the wrath of God or the consequences of sin. They promise health and wealth with the gospel, to lure people to follow. Some preachers are keener on the growth of their own bank balances than they are on the growth of your spiritual life. They twist the scriptures to make them say what they want.

But Paul is interested in integrity in his preaching the gospel. Stating it clearly and openly for all to see. The battles that rage over doctrine in the Anglican church at the moment, turn on the plain reading of the bible the open statement of the truth.

When we break in a minute I wonder if we could talk about the temptations for us distort the word of God, and manipulate rather than openly speak of truth. Are there parts of the Bible you don't want to speak about?

So we have:

Ministry Framework - Mercy

Ministry Means – Openness

3. Ministry Outcomes – Blindness and sight vv 3-4

³And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴In their case 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.

Some people won't understand the message of the gospel. It is like a veil or blindfold has covered their eyes, to the truth. I met a man last year who had sat in an Anglican church for 40 years and still didn't understand that he was saved by God's grace – "surely my effort contributes to salvation", he said.

How can this be? Well Paul says this is not just an intellectual problem, or even a communication problem, but that Satan, "the god of this age", spiritually blinds the minds of the unbelievers to the message of the light of Christ. As we proclaim the gospel there is something spiritual afoot with people's spiritual sight.

The Corinthian Christians need to know, that the ministry of the New Covenant is a spiritual ministry. It is about the powers of darkness being pushed back – the spiritual opening of eyes. You cannot convince someone into the Kingdom of God.

Our role, says Paul, our method – is to declare the things of God in such a way, that we make an open statement of the truth and leave the reaction to God, knowing that the god of this world is at work blindfolding people to the truth.

That's why I chose the reading from Isaiah 9 this morning. The coming of the messiah Jesus, was the dawning of the light in the dark world.

Becoming a Christian is fundamentally different to joining a rotary club, or a signing up at the local gym. The church's role is a declaratory one - An open statement of the truth with integrity, and spiritual sight being given by God himself.

Our question for reflection is: How have you seen the God of this world blind the minds of unbelievers to the gospel?

the final principle is

4. Ministry Content – Christ vv 5-6

⁵ For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. ⁶ 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 knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Christian ministry is aimed at proclamation, telling the good news. That's how people become disciples.

Paul uses is a secular word for announcing good news. It is the word for herald – the person who announces great things. The proclamation of Christ is not just for the professional preacher but for each one of us as we herald the good news.

New Covenant ministry is proclamation ministry. And the church has good news to tell the world.

And it's not about US, but it is about Jesus. Paul says – he doesn't proclaim himself, but Jesus Christ. All about him. As we are servants of others for Jesus' sake.

Seems to me that the church often gets distracted talking about lots of things. They are important things like poverty, and justice for the oppressed. We talk about climate change and racial inequality. And well we should. these things are vitally important.

But we need to make sure that we don't stop talking about the one thing that ONLY we will talk about – and that is the person of Jesus. The bible's message is that the whole of history is about him and we are headed to the moment when he will return and judge the world. And so we need to take up our responsibility to avoid distraction, and announce to the world, that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Our church here, serves the people of Battery Point to proclaim to them Jesus Christ as Lord, because it is only through Jesus, that we can see the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in his face.

We preach Jesus, the Messiah and the Lord.

Our question is how can we keep him at the centre of everything we say and do?

So our principles for ministry:

Mercy – our Ministry Framework

Openness – our Ministry Means

Spiritual Blindness and sight – our Ministry Outcomes

Proclaiming Christ – our Ministry Content

⁶For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.