**June 20 2021 Beyond Superficiality -** 2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Core training has become popular, I first encountered this after the birth of my first child. It made sense, strengthening these core muscles would strengthen and support the whole body. It enables other areas time to heal, improves agility and mobility, strengthens the body’s ability to carry a heavy load. Core training is always valuable, but it is really important when something like injury or illness has depleted the body’s strength. When we strengthen the core, the whole body will benefit.

That which is at the core of our relationship with God and others can work in a similar fashion.

There are difficulties in Paul’s relationship with the Corinthian community. He has written to them before, we have one such letter, but at least one other has never been found. The issues are significant. He has written a “painful” letter to them seeking to address the issue, now he writes again recognising that things remain unresolved.[[1]](#footnote-1)

We don’t know precisely what the problem was between Paul and the Corinthian community, but that may be good, it prompts us to focus on how Paul addressed the problem rather than the specifics of the problem.

**Honesty**

Paul is not prepared to sweep the issues he has had with these people under the carpet. He wants integrity, openness, no superficiality. They need to deal with the core of the issue.

Paul points to four characteristics which are at the core of developing and sustaining good relationships. The **first being** honesty. Paul is honest with them regarding the challenges of following Jesus.

He describes without reserve what it has been like for him

Things will go wrong, times will be tough. How will they respond?

There will be challenges in their circumstances. Paul gives a detailed list of the challenges he has faced,[[2]](#footnote-2) it is so extensive that it appears to be limitless.[[3]](#footnote-3) In the background of this list is a vivid testimony. Paul has responded to these challenges though depending on the gifts of God things such as purity, love, patience, kindness, knowledge, and holiness of spirit (or perhaps the Holy Spirit).[[4]](#footnote-4)

He appeals to them to be open with him. To open their hearts. To share honestly with him and to work together at strengthening their relationship with him. Relationships are at the core of all human life, whatever our age, whatever our context.

**Grace**

These people had come to faith in Jesus, they had experienced the grace of God. Paul understood the link between being recipients of God’s grace and the challenges of living with integrity as followers of Jesus. He wanted them to realise that this grace is not cheap, it was available to them because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. This grace, humbly received, should then become apparent in the way in which they live. *“God loves us as we are, but God does not leave us as we are, God wants us to grow increasingly more like Jesus.”[[5]](#footnote-5)* So grace was the second characteristic which should mark their relationships.

The process of sharing the good news of Jesus will result in its own challenges. Paul has been misrepresented and misinterpreted whilst sharing this good news, yet he has responded with perseverance and grace.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The message is of Jesus is challenging. In the media we also often see Christians misrepresented regarding their beliefs and how they express them. This can create a subtle pressure to be silent, not to risk being misunderstood or criticised. However, we have been called to share what God has done for us with others. Part of the cost of our discipleship is the possibility of misrepresentation by others.

**The Faithfulness of God**

The capacity to live with being misunderstood was sustained by Paul’s confidence in the faithfulness of God. The third core characteristic which should mark their relationships was this confidence in God’s faithfulness. Such confidence allowed Paul to move beyond seeking human approval and focus on following God.

All of the lectionary readings for today relate to challenging times, David fighting Goliath, the disciples in the storm at sea, they also all remind us of the faithfulness of God in the midst of hugely challenging circumstances. When Goliath challenged the army of Israel, with limited resources and experience, David responded. He was prepared to fight Goliath because at the core of his being he believed that God would enable him to do so, and God was faithful to David. Trusting in the faithfulness of God, involves actively looking at what God can do, not just what we may be able to do.

 The Corinthian community had been in a stormy relationship with Paul. Relationships are tested in challenging times, however we are also aware that our faithful God goes with us in these times. Paul was seeking to communicate this to the Corinthians as he detailed the ways in which God had been faithful to him. The Corinthian community needed to remember the faithfulness of God to them.

**Community**

As individuals, recognising that God will be faithful to us can be difficult. The challenges around us can seem overwhelming, and it is easy to lose sight of God. Therefore, we have been called to be part of the community of God, our faith in God is not a private matter nor is it an individual matter, we are called to be part of the “body of Christ” the community of God. The final core characteristic which should mark their relationships is a commitment to one another, a commitment to live as the community of Christ.

Paul’s honesty caused him to acknowledge the very real challenges of living as a community of followers of Jesus. God calls us to serve others as a community, but serving always comes with challenges.

Community gives us the ability to support each other, particularly through the tough times. It gives us the flexibility for a variety of people to undertake various roles, but it also causes us to confront our own failures, blind spots, fears and weaknesses.

Jesus’ community is a welcoming, accepting community. It forces us to relate to diverse personalities which can trigger conflict, misunderstandings, hurt feelings and disputes. Then we need to work at reconciliation.

The church is called by the God who reconciles us to be communities of reconciliation. This is indeed part of the cost of discipleship as it cuts across the popular and natural tendency towards self-centredness.

So we are called to an openness and honesty in relationships, to making ourselves vulnerable and to truly listening to the other. We are called to excel in offering grace to others. We are called to remember and celebrate the faithfulness of God. We are called to be a community of reconciliation, a community that forgives, a community that accepts the gifts that others bring, a diverse and welcoming community.

Gil Cann tells the story of taking a young friend who was not at the time a Christian to a meeting held by a Christian community. They met in a home, most sat on the floor as there were not enough chairs. It was not a Sunday, they had no hymn books and no key speaker, “the people participated freely, sharing their needs, news, hopes, experiences and lessons learned. They encouraged and prayed for one another and enjoyed a meal together. They lingered long afterward, seeming unwilling to go home.” When Gil drove his friend home he was silent, the young man was deep in thought. As they parted the man turned to him and “said, *“That was a real church wasn’t it?”* How could he know? He knew very little about churches, but he seemed to know instinctively a real church when he saw one.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

He saw a community committed to good relationships. A community committed to honest openness with one another, a community that expressed grace to each other, a community that reminded one another about the faithfulness of God and a community that was deeply committed to being a true community for one another, through all the experiences of life.

1. 2 Corinthians 2:3 makes reference to the letter which came from Paul’s “pain”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2 Cor 6:4-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. J. Paul Sampley, “Second Corinthians: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” in Leander E. Keck et al. (Eds.) *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) **&&&** [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 2 Cor 6:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Max Lucado [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 2 Cor 6:7-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Gil Cann, *Red Alert: Does the Future have a Church?* (Menangle, N. S. W.: Abatross Books, 2018) 104-105 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)