

# Now is the day of salvation

2 Corinthians 5.20-6.2

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Ash Wednesday is the start of the liturgical season of Lent - the period of fasting that leads up to the celebration of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

During this period in the church year we look at ourselves, it is a time of introspection. And we do this in the light of Jesus Christ. He is, as it were, the mirror into whom we look for having a sharper view of ourselves.

I like to use the passage that we read from the letter of Paul to the Corinthians, to help us begin this process of introspection.

## 1. The Ambassador

St Paul speaks of himself and his fellow missionaries as ‘ambassadors’ of Christ, who urge the people to be reconciled with God.

Why does Paul use that word ‘ambassador’? I think the people in Corinth understood the importance of the choice of that word.

In the year 146 BC, the Greek city of Corinth, together with many other Greek cities, rebelled against Roman predominance in Greece.

The Roman consul Mummius, with 23,000 infantry and 3,500 cavalry advanced against the Greek revolutionaries who were camped at Corinth. This resulted in the total destruction of the city.

All of her treasures and art were plundered. The entire adult male population was put to the sword and the female population and children were sold as slaves.

100 years later, in 44BC, the Roman Emperor Julius Caesar re-established the city of Corinth as a Roman colony. For doing this, Caesar send ambassadors to Corinth to make this new start for that Roman province.

When the Roman senate decided that a country should become a province they would send ambassadorts to it. These ambassadors, along with the victorious general, arranged the terms of peace with the vanquished people. They would determine the boundaries of the new province, draw up a constitution for its new administration, and then returned to Rome to submit what they had done for ratification by the senate.



These ambassadors were the men responsible for bringing others into the family of the Roman Empire.

So Paul, as he uses the word 'ambassador' for himself, sees himself as the man who brings to others the peace proposal of God, whereby the people can become citizens of his empire and members of his family.

Paul had gone to Corinth as a representative of God and he had brought those who believed his message into the Kingdom of God.

## 2. The Message

The Ambassador had a message from God. We must never shrink from the task of proclaiming the Christian Gospel, or be intimidated by today's religious pluralism. The ministry and the message of the church is founded on the fact that we are sent by the King.

And the message was simple: "Be reconciled to God". To the people in enemy territory the ambassador of the King arrives with his message of peace. "God offers peace. From his side, all is okay. Now it is up to you. You can now be reconciled to God. All are invited."

The New Testament never speaks of God being reconciled to men, but always of men being reconciled to God.

God does not have to be reconciled to us. It is not as if we have to pacify an angry God.

The whole process of salvation takes its beginning from him. It was because God so loved the world that he sent his son. It is not that God is estranged from man but that man is estranged from him.

God's message, the message which Paul brought, is an appeal from a loving Father to wandering and estranged children to come home where love is waiting for them.

While we were still enemies, God reached out to us in love. How he did this, Paul also describes:

For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This wonderful exchange is the heart of the message of the Gospel. God came to humankind so that humankind can come to God. God suffered so that we receive his grace.

Our iniquity was laid on him, and his goodness, his purity, his righteousness, is laid on us.

Martin Luther, in one of his writings, says:

That is the mystery which is rich in divine grace to sinners: wherein by a wonderful exchange our sins are no longer ours but Christ's and the righteousness of Christ not Christ's but ours. He has emptied Himself of His righteousness that He might clothe us with it, and fill us with it. And He has taken our evils upon Himself that He might deliver us from them... in the same manner as He grieved and suffered in our sins [...], in the same manner we rejoice and glory in His righteousness. (Martin Luther, Werke (Weimar, 1883), 5: 608)



It is as if the ambassador of Julius Caesar goes to the people who have been fighting the Empire, and he tells them: Yes, you have been fighting me, but I offer you full forgiveness, and I will pay for the repairs of your city of Corinth, and from now on I treat you as full citizens of my Empire.

That is wonderful news. Good news. God has made all things well for us. He waits for us with open arms.

### 3. Not in vain

But then comes the warning. Paul then says to them - and to us:

As God's fellow workers we urge you, we appeal to you, not to receive the grace of God in vain.

Paul addresses the people he is warning as the church of God, as saints, as brothers, as people who have been reconciled to God. And exactly those people he warns that it is possible that they have received the grace of God in vain.

What does this mean?

Through the ambassador, Paul, God offers people his grace. God's grace is available for all people really.

The people in the church in Corinth has also received this grace. God gave it, and they took it. They believed the Gospel. They became Christians. They had been reconciled to God.

To receive God's grace in vain means, I think, that we have received the grace of God as a fantastic present. We have become part of his family. We are safe in the hands of God. But we do not fully unpack the present.

The grace of God can be in our life as that great untapped source of energy and wellbeing that we have, but we do not use it to the maximum extent.

To receive the grace of God in vain means to not fully live by what you believe.

Imagine a mother. She sacrifices and toils to give her son every chance, surrounds him with love, plans for his future with care, and does everything humanly possible to equip him for life.

And suppose the son feels no debt of gratitude, never feels the obligation to repay by being worthy of all this; and suppose he fails, not because he has not the ability, but because he will not try, because he ignores the love that gave him so much.

That breaks a father's heart. When God gives men all his grace and they take their own foolish way and frustrate that grace which might have recreated them, once again Christ is crucified and the heart of God is broken.

Imagine a country suffering from draught. No rain, no water. Nothing to drink. A mighty rivers flows right through that land. Biut no-one uses the fresh water to satisfy their needs.

That is dumb. Just as we act often rather dumb. We do not allow the grace of God that we received in our life, to actually fill our whole life.

And during Lent, that is what we consider. In Lent we thirst for the fresh air of God's grace to fill every nook and cranny of the building of our life.

And in order to fill the house of our life, some action is need. Some cleaning. Sweeping the floors, taking the junk out, opening the windows for a fresh breath of air

And it is about asking God to then fill us.

The action of cleaning the house is not something heavy, something that should upset us, or frustrate us. We are imperfect beings till we die. But we do what we can, and God will fill the house of your life.

We will receive the sign of the cross on our forehead. The cross is the symbol of what God has done for it. It is the place of the great exchange.

So we rejoice in that sign. He died for us, to give us life.

The cross also symbolises our own mortality.

Our only hope is in God, that He revives us. One day in the new heaven and the new earth.

And now, as we live, he also energizes us - if we allow his grace to fill us.

May God bless us in this period of Lent; that He draws us closer to himself, that we move closer to Him. That His Spirit refreshes our whole life.

**+ Amen.**

