

2 Corinthians Chapter 3
'... only in Christ is the veil taken away.' (2 Corinthians 3:14)
Fifth Sunday of Easter
Sermon for Rockingham-Mandurah Livestream 10 May 2020
By Pastor Matt Bishop, Bethlehem Lutheran Church Morley

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!
I am proclaiming the word of God to you from the third chapter of second Corinthians.

I read from verse 14: **'... only in Christ is the veil taken away.'**

Let's pray: Lord, in all things help us to trust in you alone. Unveil this word to us now. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Last week in our sermon series on the Bible book of 2nd Corinthians Bishop Mike looked at chapter 2.

You might recall that St Paul was urging – AND PRACTICING – forgiveness.

He'd upset the Corinthians.

But he had a message for them that was still really important to hear.

So what he was doing was laying the relational groundwork to clear the way for them to hear.

You might remember Mike used St Paul's metaphor of fragrances – basically the beautiful fragrance of sound relationship where faith does the transaction of forgiveness.

I pray that was blessing for you this week as you invested in forgiveness and stepped into the joys that faith in Christ in offers.

In terms of chapter 3 though: this is where St Paul gets to the nub of the issue that he was preparing the ground work for.

On Friday when the Prime Minister was announcing the way forward for Australia with the easing of Coronavirus restrictions I was in a way reminded of what the issue at Corinth was.

The PM mentioned how he wants Australia to be kangaroo and emu like. Kangaroos and Emus can't go backwards – one of the reasons they are on our coat arms.

The PM doesn't want us going backwards as we recover from the various lockdowns and restrictions.

The problem that St Paul was writing about is that the church at Corinth had gone backwards in terms of what they were now placing their confidence in.

What do you place your confidence in?

What we place our confidence in tells us a lot about what we trust in.

Last week Bishop Mike talked a lot about how Christianity is quite upside down.

One of our absolutely central-key-core beliefs – yet quite upside down to the world - is that **we trust** in the death of a Jesus Christ for the life it brings.

Well what had happened in Corinth is that this same trust in Jesus that the Corinthians had initially grasped so strongly had been replaced with confidence in something else.

It seems that 'pseudo' or 'kind of' Christians had come from somewhere else – possibly a breakaway Christian church from Jerusalem.

Exactly what they were preaching is something we have to piece together because Paul doesn't lay out to the original readers what they already know.

But in St Paul saying that he himself is not peddling the word of God for profit he seems to be indicating his opponents were (see 2 Cor 2:17).

Peddler was the name given to people who watered down wine but sold it as full strength wine.

This is nothing more than stealing.

In effect, these peddlers of a different kind of message were stealing from the Corinth church.

But it wasn't wine they were stealing.

INSTEAD they were stealing the message of trust in Christ as being the sole source of salvation.

To that message it seems the peddlers were adding the need to still follow the old way of doing things that God had given to Moses.

For those of you who don't know, Moses was an earlier and central figure in the Bible.

He lived about 1,300 years before Jesus.

So 3,300 years ago or so.

God gave him the Ten Commandments.

This was a covenant - an agreement if you like... God promised to be their God and care for them as he already had done bringing them out of slavery in Egypt.

(By the way, today we call this covenant the Old Covenant).

But he asked in return that they be faithful to him.

Faithful in thought, word and deed.

The people found being faithful very hard.

The terms of the covenant – called the law – were not bad in themselves.

But as the people couldn't keep them they ended up showing them their sin.

An example was disobeying a very basic part that commanded them to avoid intermarrying with people of the land God had given them.

Well they did intermarry!

Then just as God said they got dragged into worshipping the other gods of those they married (who were really no gods at all).

In other words, not being faithful to the one True God in thought word and deed.

So the covenant was broken.

Fast forward over a thousand years from Moses to the church at Corinth.

The interesting thing was that this older message given to Moses was more to their liking.

Unlike us today where the problem with Christianity is not only its upside down message, but that it also is over 2000 years old, the problem in Corinth was that the message was not old enough.

In their day older messages were valued more as they believed that old customs and ideas went back to the gods.

Ancient times were seen as being closer to the gods (Barnett p68).

So a god had to be old to be credible.

Jesus at this stage had died only 30 years ago.

So the Corinthians were ripe for an old idea.

As an aside, I find this interesting because in the church today we seem ripe for ideas all the time.

Although its new ideas rather than old ones.

Part of the wonderful thing about this chapter is they way it helps us to see our own traps and pitfalls in the contemporary church.

But as helpful as that is, we need to return to the way this chapter explains why we don't need to trust anything other than the work of Christ brought to us by the Spirit.

And it's into that which Paul speaks.

He starts by making a remarkable claim about just how personally Christ has worked in the church of Corinth.

Something to aid your interpretation though: whereas last chapter Paul used the **sense** of smell and **language** of fragrance and odour, this week he employs the sense of sight and the language such as stone and veils.

He says to them:

"You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." (2 Corinthians 3:3, NIV)

It seems his opponents wanted letters of introduction from them to say what a great message they had.

Paul says he needs no such thing because they themselves are his letter. They are the evidence of the power of his message.

Not really his message, but the message of Christ brought through the power of the Holy Spirit.

It's here he starts moving into comparison with the old covenant.

So whereas the old covenant was written on tablets of stone on a mountain by Moses (Ex 34:28)... this new agreement is written by the Holy Spirit of God on the heart of all believers.

Now to digress just for moment, at this point we should be pausing to rejoice!

Not only does a chapter like this explain the central truths of Christianity it gives us a series of living personal promises from God that we can grasp to feed our faith.

For what was written to the church then is written also to us now.

God has entered the seat of your emotions and written on you with his very Spirit.

This is a personal and up-close God.

Through Jesus he shows that he is not interested in getting to know you through the old way of doing things.

The old covenant that no one could keep just leads us to despair when we don't keep it.

You know what the weight of guilt and shame feels like.

On the other hand it can lead us to a false sense of security when we think we have.

You know how conceited we can all be.

God comforts us by removing those dead ends and giving us Jesus.

In fact, writing him on our hearts.

Rejoice!

From here Paul goes out of his way though to emphasise this is solely God's work.

Remember that the opponents are focusing on the Old Covenant that is all about the work of the people.

To that Paul says: *"Such confidence we have through Christ before God."* (2 Corinthians 3:4, NIV)

"He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." (2 Corinthians 3:6, NIV)

That's a bit of an opaque ending.

But the letter is the letters of the old covenant on the stone.

The people couldn't keep this so it condemned them.

The Spirit is the letter of the new covenant written on the heart of believers.

Paul's main purpose here is to move the people of Corinth to confidence in Christ alone.

You see, Christ has fulfilled the old covenant for us.

So it is no longer relevant for connecting with God.

As I said the old covenant relied on faithfulness in thought, word and deed.

The people showed they couldn't keep it.

But Christ did.

If you are looking for an example of Jesus' faithfulness look no further than his prayer the night before he dies:

"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." (Matthew 26:39, NIV)

This is his prayer of faithfulness.

From there Jesus goes to his obedient death for the lack of faithfulness of us all.

There at the cross he establishes the new covenant.

One based on him and his faithfulness that he passes over to us in the life of the Spirit.

'... for the Spirit brings life'.

From this point for the rest of chapter Paul unpacks how the new covenant is better than the old.

He is clever here though because what he goes back to the ancient which is their preference.

In this way he builds a bridge to the new – always important when talking with people about faith – try to go to where they are.

Paul mentions how Moses wore a veil over his face after receiving the Old Covenant (*Exodus 34:29-35 – it helps to read this in the wider context of the Exodus 32-34 which deals with the Golden Calf, God's anger, Moses intercession and the re-giving of the 'Old' Covenant*).

Otherwise his face was too bright for the people to stand.

Yet Paul makes a contrast:

“Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?” (2 Corinthians 3:7–8, NIV)

Moses was only mortal so his face would eventually fade unlike God's. It was transitory.

Paul recognises this and makes a parallel with the fact the old covenant is only transitory.

In other words, as good as and glorious as the old covenant was how much better is the new one completed in Christ?

He gives a list that includes the following:

- It doesn't fade, but lasts forever.
- It is written on our hearts by the very spirit of God
- It does not condemn
- Instead it gives Jesus own rightness with God.

Once more we ought to be pausing to rejoice in these promises.
Hopefully you can do that a lot this week as you go over this chapter.

But I want to get to the last part.

You see, Paul tells the church in Corinth and the Holy Spirit tells us now that we don't need look upon God through the veil anymore.

Verse 14 holds the key:

"...only in Christ is [the veil] taken away." (2 Corinthians 3:14, NIV)

Paul can say this because of the way Jesus decisively removed a veil.
Let's go to the open tomb Easter Morning and read from John's Gospel to see this:

*"Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, **as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head.** The cloth was still lying in its place, **separate from the linen.**" (John 20:6–7, NIV)*

When Jesus resurrected he took off the veil wrapped around his head.
That discarded veil becomes for us the permanent symbol that a new covenant is now here.

No more veil.

No more old covenant.

Just God's glory coming to us in the work of Jesus.

Glory that never fades because Jesus is immortal.

That is why Paul has to remind us just how good this is.

Out of that ditched death mask in the tomb comes freedom given by the Spirit of God.

"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

(2 Corinthians 3:17)

In Christ's death we have freedom over the letter that kills.

We also have freedom now to respond to God in love.

And lastly we are given this most remarkable promise:

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18, NIV)

So let's not water Jesus down by going back to the terms of the Old Covenant.

It's a backward step.

There is no freedom there.

If you had trouble last week investing in forgiveness maybe that was because you were trusting in yourself more than the work of Christ.

As a whole church, if we have trouble being bold about the future, maybe that's because we are watering down our message.

In both cases we do well to trust in the transforming glory of our Lord Jesus Christ and keep contemplating it through worship, word, prayer and response.

For only in Christ is the veil taken away.

Let's pray: Holy Spirit, we thank you for the comfort that comes with writing Jesus on our hearts. Keep us faithful in not watering down your message, going backwards or trusting ourselves more than you. Keep teaching us of the ever-increasing glory you bring us through Jesus. And make us teachable. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.