

Peace to the brothers, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love. Ephesians 6.23-4.

There was some craic here last week at our Joint Service for the last Sunday of the Old Year. I had just finished my sermon when one of the visitors shouted out, 'That was a fantastic sermon'. No sooner had I thanked this clearly very discerning man than another of our guests called out from the back, 'And I second that!' (Mind you, a visitor from Glasgow quite rightly said to me at the door as he left, 'Beware when all men speak well of you'). So what was I saying that stirred the congregation last Sunday to such loud appreciation? Well, it was St Stephen's Day, and I was speaking on Stephen as the first Christian martyr. I was urging us all to stand up, like him, for Jesus. My sermon was all about integrity and having the courage of your convictions. What I think stirred the congregation was my contrast of the courage of St Stephen who was prepared to pay with his life for his faith in the Lord Jesus with the gutlessness of our modern church leaders who would rather deny Jesus than 'offend' others. It was pitiful to hear the Abp of Canterbury who had been given a slot on prime-time BBC News use his Christmas Day sermon to criticise the Government about cuts rather than to call the nation back to God and to point them towards the Lord Jesus.

The cheer that greeted my sermon last week confirmed for me that our people are hungering for leadership, for clergy and preachers who actually believe in our core product, Jesus as Saviour and Lord, and who aren't frightened to say it. I believe that that is why so many are converting in this country

to Islam. It's because Muslims do actually believe what they are meant to believe, and they don't trim the message to please fashion or the crowds. That integrity is very powerful, and we Christians need to stop cringing and to stand up and speak out. After the Pope's visit, as I pointed out last week, crucifixes started to appear with two simple words on them: NOT ASHAMED.

This is what the Bible says. It's all about Jesus, not as social worker, politician, nice guy Mr-Tolerant-of-everything-and-anything. The Bible is about Jesus as God's only Son, the world's only Saviour and its Lord. If clergy can't believe that, fine. But cut up your collar and go and get a proper job.

And let's stop this nonsense of worrying about 'offending' people. The BBC, ITV, C4 are terribly anxious about Christians 'offending' people. Well, when they put on trash with violence, swear words, gratuitous sex scenes, and expletives like 'Jesus' and 'Christ' peppering their characters to be 'edgy', it jolly well offends me and millions of other decent people in the country, but that sort of 'offending' is OK. No-one is offended by people expressing sincerely-held views, so long as they are delivered with good manners. We all recognise integrity.

Now why am I repeating last Sunday's sermon? (You see, if you're not here last week, you'll get it the next)! I want to wind up our long study of *Ephesians*, and it is on this note that it ends. St Paul prays in 6.19 on p1177 that he will be able to proclaim the gospel 'fearlessly'. *Parrhesia*, 'boldly' is the word, vv19-20...

Our people in this country are walking in darkness. We are materially rich with comforts and opportunities unimagined

fifty years ago, but we have no generally agreed moral road map. Something is right if it feels good to *you*. That's no way to live your life. It's a value-free zone with no sense of purpose agreed by everyone. People need to hear about Jesus, but how can they, when our church leaders are too frightened to speak publicly of him lest they 'offend' someone. Last week the National Secular Society was threatening to abolish the few remaining school assemblies because it offends children's human rights. Isn't the devil subtle? He has been using excellent things like tolerance, equality and human rights to stamp out Christianity from this once Christian country, this country which 400 years ago gave the world the incomparable translation of the Bible, the Authorised Version, which King James himself authorised, but for which declaring publicly today you can be charged with a hate-crime.

Go back to *Eph* 6.19-20. Paul actually asks his friends to *pray* for him that he will be able to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ *fearlessly*. It *isn't* easy to proclaim Jesus publicly to a hostile society of unbelief. It wasn't easy for Paul 2000 years ago in pagan Rome, and it isn't easy in 2011 in our secular, consumerist society. And that's why our leaders, like Paul, need us to pray for them that they will preach Jesus *fearlessly*. People need him, even if they don't yet want him.

And that brings me to my closing comment on this magnificent letter to the *Ephesians*, John Calvin's favourite book. The only reason we declare Jesus at all is that we *love* him, v24...God isn't 'Him up there' or an 'It'. God isn't a theory, but a person with a name and a face - Jesus. And we are

invited, not to know about him or even to understand him, but to love him. Christianity is far, far more than some inspiring moral code or political programme to improve the world. Christianity is having a personal relationship with Jesus. And you *can* have a personal relationship with him, because he is not some dead figure from the past like Isaiah or Gandhi, but the living Lord whom God raised from the dead at Easter. He is still alive, still touching people and changing lives. You can know him by reading the Bible and hearing him still speak. You can talk to him by saying your prayers. You can walk with him by doing his will. 'Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye did it unto me', said Jesus to those who fed and clothed the poor.

The people of this once great nation need to know that there *is* a purpose to life; that their lives *do* count; and that God does love them and care about them. As we end now our study in *Ephesians*, and as we begin this new year, let us take these two thoughts from the end of *Eph* as our New Year's resolutions: to enter into a personal relationship of love with Jesus and to have the backbone to proclaim him boldly. Wherever God has set you, in your families, neighbourhoods and places of work, let these two words be your watchword for 2011: NOT ASHAMED.

The only reason I am standing before you today is that in June of 1966 a young NI Baptist Sunday School teacher once asked me, 'Brian, would you like to ask Jesus into your heart?' I replied, 'Yes, I would', and I did. The rest is history. But suppose he had been so anxious not to offend that he hadn't asked me! I thank God he had the courage of his convictions!