



Rev Simon Ponsonby says we must hold fast to the truth and centrality of the gospel if our message is not to be shaped by society's norms

Dear Church,

I am humbled and honoured to be invited to write this letter and share with you my heart for the Church in Britain. For the past ten years I have been commissioned by St Aldate's, Oxford to teach and preach across the nation to a variety of denominations and traditions. And what a beautiful, diverse, glorious Church she is: the wisdom of God, pre-eminent among his handiworks, the great wonder of the world the Body of Christ, the bride of Christ, the pride of Christ. What a privilege it has been to serve the Church in some very small way. However, as I have travelled I have felt a creeping unease – I fear all is not as it should be.

I wonder what Augustine of Canterbury would say to us? Or the Celtic missionaries, Aidan and Columba, or the medieval intimates of Christ, Margery Kempe and Mother Julian; or the Bible translators, Wycliffe and Tyndale, or the Oxford martyrs, Ridley, Latimer, Cranmer; or the imprisoned preachers Samuel Rutherford and John Bunyan; or the evangelists Wesley and Whitefield, or the social transformers Shaftesbury and Booth? What would this great British cloud of witnesses make of today's Church?

A former glory?

On my walk to work I pass a small, historic, blue circular plaque attached to the Quaking Bridge over Castle Mill Stream, Oxford, that states '*Buddleja Davidii* flowered here from June to Sept 2014'. There was a time when, for just a brief season, a glorious buddleia bush flourished. This wonderful plant is sometimes called 'butterfly heaven' because of the nectar from its exquisite blooms that attracts many species of butterfly. But the beauty was fleeting and it blazed for just a short season.

As I pondered the plaque today, I sensed the Lord begin to show me that this was a metaphor for his beloved Church. We were born to blossom and bless, to ooze the life-

giving nectar of the gospel and kingdom works. But tragically, many have withered, and all that is left is a memorial testifying to a former story, a former glory when once we flourished. I love Church history – but fear we put up with a naïve nostalgia of a former glory rather than participate in writing our own story today.

Drop the cross; lose the plot

Just moments after musing on the blue plaque, a colleague attending a Christian conference texted me to say that the huge cross hanging on the front wall had suddenly crashed to the floor during morning worship. This event occurred at exactly the time I was contemplating the plaque on the bridge. The conference delegates, eyes closed in praise, were oblivious to what had just occurred. The cross had crashed to the floor, but almost no one had noticed.

Are we so occupied with ministry programmes, seminars and singing that we have missed the most central thing? If we drop the cross we lose the plot, and we cannot blossom and bless, only wither and die. All our conferences, all our busyness, all our eyes-closed singing are just building sandcastles in a rising tide if the cross is lost.

Gospel first

Dropping the cross is nothing new. The apostle Paul frequently warned churches of this danger and called them back to the centrality of Christ crucified. In a text that I have been increasingly drawn to as I've ministered in Britain, Paul writes: 'I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you...By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you...For what I received I passed on to you *as of first importance*: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...' (1 Corinthians 15:1-4, emphasis mine.)

We have a gospel. We have the breath-taking, heart-racing, life-changing, epic story of God who loves us and has come for us. This story of stories presents God in Christ entering the world to rewrite our fractured story, to rescue the drowning, to find the lost, to free the bound, to comfort the broken, to restore the fallen, to enlighten the confused, to create community, to transform society, to recreate creation. Without it we are doomed, we are damned. Death and life and heaven and hell are at stake here.

I was shocked by a comment in a recent article in *The Spectator*, where self-professed atheist Matthew Parris criticised the Church for being unfaithful to her theology and 'bending to a prevailing mood'. What an insight – and what a rebuke! The gospel is the criterion of all we do, as Martin Luther expressed so succinctly; *crux probat omnia* (the cross tests everything).

One gospel

Paul speaks of *the* gospel, not *a* gospel. There is only one, not one among many. God does not change, the human condition does not change, and the gospel of God to save us does not change. Language, context, culture and idioms change, and so our words

and even our methods for presenting the gospel must be flexible. But the gospel remains the same and to this we must bind ourselves, rather than bend to a prevailing culture.

I have seen with increasing sadness how many are not content with merely adapting the language of the gospel to our culture, but seek to change the very message itself and trim it to fit in with society's prevailing norms and appetites. What a tragedy when the Church does this. I profoundly disagree with those who say we need a new kind of Christianity. Instead we need a *true* kind of Christianity, one grounded in the gospel as first delivered. As John Wimber, apostolic founder of the Vineyard movement once warned: 'Don't mess with the gospel, it was great then and it's great now.'

"No one is saved outside of the gospel, but no one is outside the gospel's power to save"

Irreducible minimum

We must return to God's story of stories as the epicentre of our identity. But what is the centre of this good news? Paul summarises it for us in the passage quoted above. Tom Wright calls it the 'irreducible minimum', without which this is not the gospel, we are not saved, and without believing, living and sharing this we are not the Church.

The mystery and marvel of the gospel is driven by God's furious, extravagant love for us, unwilling to conceive eternity without us at home with him. The core of the gospel is that Jesus, God's eternal Son, submitted himself freely to the purposes of God, and represented humankind in dying for our sins at the cross and rising again to victory on the third day. This is the gospel – salvation is achieved by Jesus' death and resurrection. The Scots prince of preachers, Professor James S Stewart called these the 'primal verities' of our faith.

Are we preaching it?

Are we preaching this gospel of the saving God? Yes, some are – but on the one hand I also see the Church accommodating itself to a toxic implicit liberalism and fashioning a non-gospel from the topsy-turvy ethical relativism of this age.

On the other hand I see a Church gripped by a consumerism that distracts the saints from the main and the plain of gospel ministry, and which turns divine worship into a circus for the pursuit of ever more eccentric and esoteric experiences. We need to devote ourselves to the hard work of prevailing intercessory prayer, deep study and application of our scriptures, the imitation of Christ, to sharing our great story, to ministering to the poor, keeping in step with the spirit and taking up our cross.

I long to see renewal in the Church and revival in this nation. For this to happen we must repent of bending to culture, of sidelining our gospel. And we must urgently pray to be filled with the spirit of God, for only when we are endowed with power from on high will we be what God has called us to be and do what he has called us to do. The spirit falls on those who cling to the cross. The spirit flows from the cross and leads us to the cross.

If we want spiritual renewal, if we want the Church to break out in blossom, rather than be a trivial memory, we need to put back the cross. No one is saved outside of the gospel, but no one is outside the gospel's power to save. So let us return to the gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected. Let us hold firmly to it and hold it out to the world. What are we waiting for?

REV SIMON PONSONBY is pastor of theology at St Aldate's, Oxford and a Bible Teacher at this year's Spring Harvest