

Well we're embarking on this journey through the Book of Romans, and I was thinking as we begin what should we call this series. And then when I read the passage for this morning's teaching I found the answer – because really Paul is an incredible example of someone who is never ashamed of the Gospel which he proclaims widely and boldly wherever he goes. So I'm going to call this series, 'Unashamed to live the Gospel Life'. And that is my prayer for all of you, that as we walk through this incredibly detailed theology and application of the Christian life, that all of us are willing to boldly proclaim the Gospel in whatever context we find ourselves.

I was thinking about my time in England where I worked for 10 years of my life every week, and for the first 5 years, I was rather silent about my faith. The team of guys that I worked with, we also socialised most nights, we ate together, we even lived in the same houses that our company had bought for us. And yet, even in that place of great friendships and living life together, I kept my faith in a box most of the time. And it was really after some time of wrestling with God that I became very aware that he had placed me there for a reason. And whilst I continued to be a poor witness of him, I did become more vocal to my work colleagues about what God was doing in my life, and how important a relationship with him was to me. I can remember those same guys flying over to Belfast to celebrate with me at my ordination. But still I don't think they fully understood how important my Christian life was to me, because I didn't find it easy to tell the Gospel story to them. And I'm sure I'm not the only one. I'm sure if I asked you all now, do you find it easy to talk to work colleagues or friends about your faith, you would probably say no, it's not easy at all..

But I wonder whether the reason we don't talk enough about the Gospel is because we see it as a task to carry out, rather than a joy or a gift that we long to share with others? I think that's why Paul had the sheer energy, the enthusiasm and the boldness to do what he did. He understood how precious the story of Jesus was and how it had transformed his life. Here's a man who knows what his past was like. Here's the man who in Acts 7 holds onto the coats of the witnesses to Stephen's declaration of the Gospel as he is stoned to death. Here's the man whose purpose in life was to eliminate the followers of the Way, because he considers these Christians to be blasphemers. And yet in the man we now call Paul, he says he's not ashamed of the Gospel because it's the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. His life is turned completely around from what he used to be. His zeal for the Gospel had left him nearly dead at Lystra. He had been beaten up, arrested, and put in jail in Philippi. He has been chased out of Thessalonica. He was nearly torn to pieces in Jerusalem all because he preached the Gospel. And after all this, he now says to the believers in Rome, I can't wait to come, I'm not ashamed. He's not going to be intimidated by anyone, even Caesar.

And today, I want all of us to think about why we should not be ashamed of the Gospel. Yes the more we stand for it, the more we will be persecuted. So if today you've come hoping that this Christian life is going to be plain sailing, then think again. As society becomes more and more secular, those of us willing to stand for God's Kingdom rule will be put down for their faith.

Let's start with that word Gospel. What does Gospel mean? That's right, good news. And when have you ever in life been ashamed of good news that comes to you? Let's take an example. Let's say, God forbid, but you take a life threatening illness. And the doctors come and tell you that the disease has been completely eradicated from your body, completely. Well, that's good news. What's the first thing that you do? You go out and celebrate and tell

your family and friends the good news. You've been given a new life. You're not ashamed to share with others.

So that's the Gospel we are talking about here – it's the most life changing gift. And so now Paul is talking about this to the Romans. Just a little context – Rome was the centre of the world at that time. The sheer size and scale of everything was overwhelming. It was the seat of power. And yet with all that power, with all the gods that they worshipped, Paul knew that there was a story to tell that was far greater than anything that mankind could create – even in Rome. He wasn't intimidated at all with the sheer grandeur of this place.

And yet for us, I think at times because we see how the world is becoming so out of touch with God, and so wrapped up in itself, then we think that the Gospel message no longer has any impact or influence. In fact we now see that the Good News brings with it opposition and criticism, so the natural approach is to step back and remain silent about our faith.

Let me give you one example of how the Gospel is unpopular. In the past week I became aware of a discussion taking place in the public sector regarding how Christmas Carol services should be led. And whilst it annoys me, it doesn't surprise me, that a senior person in the public sector stated that they wanted this year's Christmas celebration to be more inclusive of other faiths and none. Now tell me, how do you make Christmas something that's not about Jesus? But that's the world, and it is so easy to compromise our Good News in order that everyone is happy and no one is offended. So are we now more afraid of man than being obedient to God? Proverbs 29:25 says that the *'Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe'*. We've got to stand up for the Gospel and not dilute it into something that is suddenly more palatable to everyone.

And it's true that whilst we might all agree that the news of what Jesus Christ has done is Good News, we may have had occasions where we are frightened of the opposition and rejection that we may get from some people. But remember that it's such good news that if you can get a person to hear the message long enough to receive the Saviour behind the message, remember the hope that comes from that. They're going to be forgiven of their sins. They're going to have abundant life right now. And they're going to have the promise of heaven forever. That truly is good news. So Paul says, I'm not ashamed of the good news, and neither should we!

The next thing that Paul says about the Good News is that it's the **power** of God.

If you think about that word Power; Rome was the seat of power. No nation was greater. They occupied other nations. Caesar was even considered as a God. And yet with all that power, Rome still was not satisfied – they felt they needed to just conquer more. And whilst they had everything, they had nothing morally. Here's what Seneca, a roman philosopher said about Rome – *'Rome is a cesspool of iniquity.'* Paul understood the nature of the place he was speaking into, and he knew that if only these people would realise the power that he had discovered, and which he now wants to share, this power would change every life, irrespective of how depraved and immoral it was. You see Paul had seen incredible transformation take place, he knew the Gospel had the power to change nations – he had seen people's lives changed in Corinth, in Ephesus, in Antioch. Can you imagine with all its grandeur, the city of Rome would be transformed by the love and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

You see nothing gets in the way of the Gospel folks, but you might say, well why isn't Ballyclare transformed by the Gospel. Well sometimes it could be that the true Gospel isn't being faithfully taught. It could be that we are trying to do all this in our own strength and our own programmes without God being fully in control. It won't be our clever words that change people, it won't be our social media presence, or our compassion ministries, it will be the Word of God and the power of His Holy Spirit that will change lives. All we need to do is pray for that power in our own lives, and obediently speak the Gospel, nothing else. Remember back to the power that came to those first followers. Jesus said to his apostles "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth". Folks that Power that can only come from God is unstoppable. He will give you the power. You don't have to have the Theology degrees to receive it – in fact Paul said to the Corinthians in I Corinthians 2 "*When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom..... My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power*". And that's all **you** need to speak with passion - the Word of God. So Paul is not ashamed of the Gospel, and it is God's power that equips.

But finally, Paul says the Gospel "*brings salvation to everyone who believes*". Did you hear that? Not only does it bring salvation, but it's for everyone. So whether today you think you're not good enough, or you think about your past or even your present, the Gospel does not exclude you or anyone. Maybe today you can think of someone you know who is so far away from God. Maybe today that's a husband or wife who is not with you in church this morning. Well remember that the Gospel is for everyone – they are not beyond the reach of God.

Think about the nations of the world – Paul says the Gospel brings salvation to all those nations if they believe. And that's because Jesus came to bring about restoration of the nations. He came to reconcile the differences that existed between Jew and Gentile. He came to restore these differences, which is why Paul would say to the Galatians "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male or female, for you are all one in Christ*". But Paul goes further in our reading to the Romans, verse 14 "*I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks*". So we've got Jews and Gentiles, and now we have Greeks and non-greeks? What does that mean? Well the Greek world also divided people up in the way that the Jews did – there were Greeks and then there was everyone else. And today, wherever you go, there always seems to be division. But in God's eyes, the only division that takes place is between those who believe the Gospel and those that don't. It doesn't matter whether you live in different classes of society – the Gospel is the only leveller. But why then did Paul say he was obligated to them all, Greek and non-greek, wise and foolish? The King James translation provides a useful word - it says that Paul is a debtor to these groups. He's saying he's obligated or in debt to give them the Gospel.

So let's think about that word debt. We all know what it means to be in debt, don't we? If I borrow money from someone then I am in debt to them – I need to pay them back. But similarly it could be that someone gives me money to pass on to someone else, and therefore I am still in debt until I pass that money on to the person who ultimately has to receive it. It's my obligation to pass that money on, otherwise I'm in debt. So what Paul is saying here is that he has been given the Gospel, the Good News, and he knows how precious it is, and he remains in debt to God the giver of the Good News until he passes it on to those that God wants him to give it to. I hope that makes sense.

It reminds me of a funny story when I was Curate in Jordanstown. I had led a wedding in the church, but Jordanstown charged for weddings. I think it was £400. So the family gave me the £400 in cash to pass on to the Church Treasurer. I got home after the wedding, but somewhere in the next 24 hours, our dog Spud who was still quite bold in his early years decided to eat the envelope that was sitting on the kitchen table that had the £400 in cash. All he left were the ends of the notes. I can remember taking these up to the Ulster Bank hoping that they could replace the notes with new ones. I don't think I've ever seen a woman fall off her chair in laughter at my request. There was obviously no way that the money would be replaced. And so I was now in debt to the people who gave me it. And the only way to resolve it was to pay the treasurer myself. True story.

And for Paul and for each of us, God has given us the gift of the Gospel, but it's not for keeping to ourselves. If it stays with us, then we are in debt – we haven't passed it on. We ourselves may know the joy of receiving Jesus into our lives, but we are at that very moment loaded with debt or the obligation to deliver the message to other people who are bound and need set free from their sin. If we keep the Gospel to ourselves then we don't understand how precious it is, and other people don't get to hear the Gospel. If today you are a Christian, then you are obligated to share the Good News with others – there's no way out, otherwise it's not Good News at all. And that's why Paul says the Gospel is for everyone. Folks, if you are not sharing the Gospel then how can we sing hymns like We have a Gospel to proclaim. How can we read words such as "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news". And how can we seriously ignore words from Paul later in Romans 10 where he confronts our role as those who need to share the Gospel when he says, "How can they (that's people who haven't heard about Jesus), how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?". Folks, this Gospel that we have received is a free gift. We haven't had to pay anything for it. Jesus has paid it all. And it's our duty to celebrate and share this with those around us.

So today, if you truly do not know this amazing joy filled, abundant gift that Jesus has given us, then I beg you to come before the Lord who loves you this day and receive it. You don't have to work to earn it – it is given freely on the cross at Calvary. And if today you know the Lord as your Saviour, then can I ask you are you ashamed of it, and if the answer is no, then how on earth are you sharing it? You don't have the option. It's not Good News if you keep it to yourself.

So I pray this week as we encounter work colleagues, family and friends, we may be filled with the power of the Spirit to share that Gospel, to not be ashamed of the Gospel because it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.