

“KEEP ON ...”
Acts 18:1-17

Once again this morning we have recognised – and promised to support – people who have committed themselves to serving God in a particular way in the life of the church. They are – as we all are in different ways – dedicating themselves to sharing the gospel, in this case with the children and young people of his church and community. But, as I’m sure they’re aware, it’s not an easy life! Responding to God’s call to get involved in the work of proclaiming the gospel does not guarantee a comfortable ride: in fact, more often than not it guarantees a tough time of it. So this morning, very briefly in the time we have left, I want us to look at part of the experience of Paul, the great apostle and evangelist, in whose life we can see the struggle that entails when you commit yourself to serving Christ. And I hope it will be an encouragement, not only for the people who have been up on this stage this morning, but for all of us who are engaged in the task of spreading the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul had a great ministry – there’s no doubting that. Without his preaching the church would not have spread as it did in the first century. Without his teaching our own understanding of the gospel would be much the poorer. And without his writings we would have a very much shorter New Testament. It’s through his writings, as well as through the reporting of Dr Luke in *Acts*, that we catch a glimpse of his struggles. We’ve just read of his arrival in Corinth. He’s left Athens – one of the few places that he seems to have left peaceably and without any real opposition – and has arrived at this huge seaport towards the south of Greece.

Now we know that this was a very difficult place to work. Paul wrote several letters to the Christians there, two of which we have in our Bible (*1 & 2 Corinthians*) and it’s clear that he encountered opposition from the Jewish community, from the pagan majority and from some of the Christians themselves. That’s often the way – and it’s very frustrating. Michael Cassidy, one of the evangelical leaders who was closely involved in the ending of the apartheid system in South Africa, commented that he faced far more opposition from the Christians than he did from all the other factions put together.

But this seems to be Paul’s first visit to Corinth, so the opposition from other Christians is still in the future. Luke records, though, that he received a lukewarm response from many, opposition from others and downright abuse from his fellow Jews. In the end he left the Jewish community, towards whom his first efforts at talking about Jesus were directed, and moved in with a local Roman family. It must have been very disappointing for him.

And I’m sure we encounter disappointments in our attempts to witness to our community. The biggest may well be the apparent lack of any response. People often just don’t seem interested. There are those who mount some sort of opposition – stopping a prayer meeting in the school or workplace, maybe, or refusing to display posters, or being very uncooperative in a Sunday Club group. And there are the few who attempt to ridicule our faith or abuse us personally because of our resolve to stick to it.

Paul did see the synagogue leader, Crispus, a key figure in the Jewish community, come to faith and he was followed by many others, but it was still going to be tough. So God spoke to Paul in a dream one night. And what he said still holds good for us today, who twenty centuries later try to continue the work that Paul and his colleagues began after the ascension of Jesus. I’m not going to elaborate a great deal on what we read hear, but simply encourage you all to hear what’s being said to Paul and really apply it to our own situation here in Lichfield.

Firstly, as always, God tells Paul “*Do not be afraid*”. Don’t let it get you down, he’s saying. There’s no need to be nervous about this. Don’t allow the apparent problems you’re facing assume such an importance that they paralyse your witness. It’s easy, isn’t it, to get stressed out about the things we have to do as part of our ministry. Will we cope with all that needs to be done to set up *An Evening With Dana*

or *Henry Olonga*, with *Messy Church*, with a new term with The Mob? We're not sure what the future holds for *Soul Street* or the Monday Fellowship – how will we cope if things don't go the way we expect them to? They are the things that probably scare us more than the possibility of physical attack or personal abuse. But that doesn't mean they are any the less real. And God says, "Don't worry. Don't be afraid."

And he goes on to tell Paul that he should keep at it and not give up – "*Keep on speaking, do not be silent.*" There is still a real need for the gospel to be proclaimed. Don't let your fears and anxieties prevent that happening. Don't let them dilute your values. Sometimes, I suspect, we think that we just can't go on. The pressure is too much. We just want a quiet life. We could simply stop and not bother any more. It would mean a much easier life for us. But it wouldn't be being faithful to the call that Jesus has given us. If you watched the recent sitcom *Rev* on BBC2, you'll know that that was the struggle Adam Smallbone had in the last episode, but he realised he could not escape the call he'd been given by God. Now I do not mean for one moment that some things don't need to be laid down from time to time, that some of our plans and projects come to the end of their natural lives. But I do mean that the sharing of the good news about Jesus Christ in word and action needs to continue. Don't give up on the faith you hold and don't give up sharing it in the way God has called and equipped you to.

As I've already said, we do not experience any real censorship or opposition here in this part of the world, despite what some of the scaremongers in the press try to convince us. We still have pretty well limitless freedom to talk about our faith, and in this city we have plenty of opportunities to do that within the public life of the community – whether it's at the Fuse Festival or Carols in the Park or advertising our Holiday Club on public notice boards or giving the local business community the chance to re-examine the Ten Commandments. I believe that many Christians use a perceived opposition to our faith as an excuse not even to start doing anything. God says "Don't!" Don't be silent!

That's fair enough, we may say, but he would say that, wouldn't he? He's omnipotent and all that so he doesn't have to worry. But listen to what God says to Paul in *v10*: "*I am with you, and no-one is going to attack and harm you.*" That's slightly worrying because in the very next verse, Luke records that "*the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul*". Does God not know what he's talking about? Can he not keep a simple promise more than a couple of days? I think maybe what is meant here is that if he is attacked, he won't be harmed – God preserves him through the attack, because he is with him. After all, it says "*attack and harm you,*" not "*attack or harm you*".

We may face problems, but God is there and he will not allow us ultimately to come to any harm. I suppose we could try and spiritualise it and say that we are safe for eternity, but I do think this is a case of God standing with us if we should find ourselves under fire, but not allowing that to harm us physically. We can always count on God to give us the strength to cope when things start to get on top of us or when people try to prevent our sharing the gospel. The trouble is, God can often seem absent because we don't have his physical presence. Our faith can be really tested if we don't have him actually standing there beside us.

So he goes on to tell Paul that "*he has many people in this city*". Paul is not even physically alone. In this specific instance God works through Gallio – not a Christian, but someone who is able to protect Paul from the charges and attacks against him. As time goes by Paul will find that there are many other believers in Corinth as well. He will find support and encouragement from them. In both his letters to the Christians in Corinth he expresses his thanks for their help and support – materially, emotionally, spiritually.

Now, clearly there are people around the world who do find themselves isolated and persecuted for their faith with no-one physically to stand with them, but even they can know the support of others through prayer. For us, in twenty-first century Lichfield, part of Wade Street Church, we can know that God has many people in this city. There are many others in this congregation who can offer help and support and prayer – we've actually committed ourselves to that this morning. But there are plenty of God's people,

plenty of disciples in the other churches of this city – people with whom we can share and work and pray. I regularly meet with a couple of other Christians to pray and I find that a great source of support and encouragement. And there are even those, like Gallio, who probably wouldn't call themselves Christians but who can help in particular situations when we have a specific need.

Don't give up, says God, because you're not alone. I'm with you, and I've given you plenty of other Christians to stand with you. And Paul stuck at it. He preached regularly for eighteen months. Out of that faithful ministry was born the Corinthian Church. It didn't suddenly happen – Paul had to work at it. And so do we. Don't give up after the first couple of weeks because it doesn't seem to be bringing in shedloads of converts. Forge the relationships. Create the networks. Build trust and confidence. It takes time very often. I get very frustrated with people who are constantly revising their vision, going off into new projects, rearranging all that they're doing just because they haven't doubled the size of their church or their group in the first couple of months. Working with the children, leading The Mob, building up Messy Church – it will take time, but stick at it.

Some years later, as we've said, Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth. All kinds of stuff had happened in the mean time. But Paul reminded the Corinthians of the foundations of their faith and encouraged them with the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I've no idea if he had this little episode from *Acts 18* in his mind as he was writing to them, but you can imagine that he might have done when you read what he put at the end of chapter 15: *"Therefore my dear brothers and sisters"* – youth workers, Sunday Club leaders, housegroup leaders, group leaders, elders, day-by-day witnesses in the school, the workplace, the college, the hospital – *"Therefore, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain."* Stick at it, folks, because God is with you – and so are we!

"KEEP ON"
Acts 18:1-17

Paul has arrived in Corinth for the first time. It was a very difficult place to work and it's clear from Paul's two Letters to the Corinthians that he encountered opposition from the Jewish community, from the pagan majority and from some of the Christians themselves. Luke records that he received a lukewarm response from many, opposition from others and downright abuse from his fellow Jews. In the end he left the Jewish community, towards whom his first efforts at talking about Jesus were directed, and moved in with a local Roman family. It must have been very disappointing for him.

So God spoke to Paul in a dream one night. And what he said still holds good for us today, who twenty centuries later try to continue the work that Paul and his colleagues began after the ascension of Jesus.

Firstly, as always, God tells Paul *"Do not be afraid"*. Don't let it get you down, he's saying. There's no need to be nervous about this. Don't allow the apparent problems you're facing assume such an importance that they paralyse your witness.

Secondly, he tells Paul that he should keep at it and not give up – *"Keep on speaking, do not be silent."* There is still a real need for the gospel to be proclaimed. Don't let your fears and anxieties prevent that happening. Don't give up on the faith you hold and don't give up sharing it in the way God has called and equipped you to. We do not experience any real censorship or opposition here in this part of the world but many Christians use a perceived opposition to our faith as an excuse not even to start doing anything. God says "Don't!" Don't be silent!

Thirdly, God says to Paul in *v10*: *"I am with you, and no-one is going to attack and harm you."* We may face problems, but God is there and he will not allow us ultimately to come to any harm. The trouble is, God can often seem absent because we don't have his physical presence. Our faith can be really tested if we don't have him actually standing there beside us. So God goes on to tell Paul that *"he has many people in this city"*. Paul is not even physically alone.

And Paul stuck at it. He preached regularly for eighteen months. Out of that faithful ministry was born the Corinthian Church. It didn't suddenly happen – Paul had to work at it. And so do we. Some years later Paul wrote in *1 Corinthians 15:58*, *"Therefore my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain."*

Questions for discussion

1. What do you find most frustrating when you are trying to witness – apathy, opposition from non-believers, lack of support from fellow-Christians or something else?
2. What makes us afraid to witness?
3. How do you reconcile God's promise in *v10* with what happened to Paul in *v12*?
4. God promises to be with us. How do we experience his presence?
5. God used Gallio (not a Christian, as far as we know) to help Paul. Can you think of any other examples of this happening in the Bible? Do you have any examples from your own experience?
6. How can we best support one another in the task of evangelism?