

Compelled by Christ's Love

2 Corinthians 5:11-21; Bible Translation Sunday 2011

The Gospel of Luke (9:51ff) tells us that one day Jesus and his disciples were passing through Samaria. Jesus wanted to meet with people in a certain village and sent some messengers to prepare his arrival. However, the people of that village refused to meet Jesus because he was on his way to Jerusalem. Samaritans apparently hated the mention of the place! James and John rightly felt that this village had insulted and shamed Jesus. So they asked him, **Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?** Jesus rebuked them. I wouldn't be surprised if he just shook his head and muttered to himself, "Why did we put Noah on that boat?"

In Togo, in West Africa where I served for many years, there was a certain village with a couple Lutheran churches. The people there gave us nothing but trouble. They were always giving us ultimatums and making unreasonable demands. It often seemed that not one of them was a true believer. I more than once suggested that our best course of action might be to nuke the place and start over. After all, didn't God himself destroy the world by a flood and start over with Noah and his family? My colleagues sometimes repeated my words in their own frustration. But we never did that, not just because we didn't have any thermonuclear devices, but because God has a better plan. Just like the Samaritans, they were people for whom Christ died, people to whom Christ wanted us to preach his Gospel. Though we stumbled, Christ's love compelled us to do better.

Today's text shows how Paul dealt with a similar situation. In Corinth he proclaimed the Good News and established what was evidently a very vibrant church. However, if you read his letters to that church, you'll see that after Paul left Corinth, some other men came in and caused trouble. They bad-mouthed Paul, cut him down and exalted themselves. Judging from what Paul writes, these "super-apostles" as he called them, belittled him saying that he was a poor speaker and had poor credentials. They even criticized him for not taking a salary from the Corinthians! They of course were men of great credentials, were excellent speakers and took a salary! The result was that the Christians started to focus on the different preachers rather than on Christ. They split into parties loyal to this or that person. Some supported Paul, but many opposed and severely criticized him.

Now Paul could have reacted like James and John or me. He could have acted from a desire for justice or vengeance and just washed his hands of Corinth. But he was their spiritual father and was motivated by something else. He could not idly sit by and watch his children be led astray and the church destroyed. These people had to stand before the judgment seat of Christ (5:10). So he went the extra mile. First he sent Titus to visit them and find out what was going on. Then he wrote what we call Second Corinthians, a letter in which he bares his soul. There we see clearly what motivated him to endure ridicule, shame, prison and beatings, to fight for the faith of others and defend them from false teachers, to have great patience, to be a missionary, an ambassador and to persuade people to believe the Gospel: he was

compelled by Christ's love. So it is and must ever be with us in the Church and in the world around us. We too must be **compelled by Christ's love!**

Now Paul explains what he means by Christ's love: **We are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.** This is indisputably the most incredible fact of all history, namely that Christ took our punishment and died in our place. God was angry at us because we rejected him in Eden and have lived as rebels ever since. Whenever we do wrong, it is because we have separated ourselves from God and have become evil. We are no longer innately good and that is why we die.

But Christ was perfect. God was not angry with him. Yet because he loves us, he had Christ suffer our judgment and die in our place. God vented his anger and satisfied his justice on Christ so that he could be merciful to us. This is incredible! You know how it would rip you apart inside if your father, mother, wife, husband or child died of natural causes. Could you ever think of sacrificing one of them, and not for yourself, but for a stranger, a thief, a rapist, a murderer? That is quite beyond us. Nevertheless, that's what God did for us. That's the incredible event in history that gripped Paul and held him fast. For he had been a violent persecutor of Christians, even an accomplice in their murder. Yet their Lord Christ died for him.

By that death, Paul the persecutor was reconciled to God. So he writes, **God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.** You see, when Adam rebelled against God, a change took place in him, not in God. All of humanity became ashamed and afraid, conscious of our now evil nature. There wasn't some mutual fight between Adam and God in which both parties were to blame. Adam unilaterally withdrew from God and became his enemy. So Paul writes that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. God never changed, never stopped loving us, so he did something to change us so that we would love him again: he took away our sins. He put them on Christ so that he didn't have to count them against us. Therefore, we are the ones reconciled to him, not him to us. We are forgiven and changed, not him. It's a one-sided making-up.

One might ask why God would do this. Paul gives two reasons. First, **He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.** And second, **God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.** In other words, God wanted to make things right again. Before Adam sinned, he was happy, there was peace and harmony. He was the image of God and was himself righteous, perfect in every way. So when Paul speaks of us becoming the righteousness of God, he seems to mean that we recover part of that image of God that we lost in Adam: we become spiritually and morally pure in God's sight. We are no longer rebels and God's enemies; instead, we are his beloved children who seek to do his will. Moreover, we receive the promise of the resurrection at which point we will recover a perfect physical life. So Paul says, **Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!** This then is what Paul means by Christ's love, that Christ died in our place, that he reconciled us to God, and that we have become pure again.

Now this understanding greatly affected Paul and his colleagues. He says that **Christ's love compels us.** His word for 'compel' means 'to urge on' or 'to impel'. In the Gospel of Luke, while reflecting on his

death, Jesus uses the same word and says, **I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!** His mission gripped and held him fast despite the suffering that lay ahead. He could do nothing else. Paul again uses the same word to describe his feeling about life and death to the Philippians: **I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better, but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.** So when Paul says that Christ's love compels him to persuade men, to beg them to be reconciled to God, it's because Christ's love has seized him and will not let him go; it drives him.

Compelled by Christ's love, Paul changed. **So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.** Compelled by Christ's love, Paul, Timothy and Titus looked at people from God's perspective rather than a human one. They considered people to be objects of God's love rather than people to exploit to their benefit. Paul once considered Jesus from a human perspective and labelled him a trouble-making Galilean, until Christ appeared to him. A second change was that Paul spent his life trying to persuade people of the Gospel that they might escape God's judgment. **We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.** And he specifically argues that he's not boasting about himself but trying to strengthen the Corinthians' faith. **We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.**

Now what instruction and consolation can you gain from Paul's experience? The first thing has to be the realization that you too are the object of Christ's love. The statement **one died for all, and therefore all died** includes you. You are part of the world that God reconciled to himself in Christ. You were a sinner estranged from God but no more. Christ has bought you with his blood. Now you are his. Now you do his will. Now you look at yourself and others from God's point of view rather than from a human point of view.

Second, you need to focus on the fact that Christ redeemed you and reconciled you to God. You must let that truth permeate your very being so that Christ's love grips you, controls you, and drives you just as it did Paul. But beware, the devil, your flesh and the world will try to get you to focus on anything but Christ's love! They don't want you to know God's love and to serve him. But when that happens, when you're driven by the conviction that Christ died for you, reconciled you to God and remaking you in the image of God, life will be different. You'll have a new sense of purpose in life and a new energy for dealing with conflict and opposition at home, at work, and in the Church.

And a third thing: Paul was an extraordinary apostle, missionary, and ambassador. We do not share his apostolic office, but we are equally compelled by Christ's love to be Christ's ambassadors. God makes his appeal through us! One of the most important things we can do is to make the Gospel intelligible to people. As Paul himself points out in another letter, you can't trust a Saviour whom you neither know nor understand! The words of our text today are powerful: **For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should**

no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: **Be reconciled to God.** NIV 2 Cor 5:14-20.

If you understand those words, the Holy Spirit can create faith in your heart and you too can be compelled by Christ's love. But if you can't understand them because they are not in your language, Christ and his love will remain some obscure, foreign phenomenon. The mission of LBTC is to help bring people to faith in Jesus Christ by making the Word of God available to those who do not yet have it in the language of their heart. That is the work of Christ's ambassadors compelled by Christ's love! As Christ's love compels you to be his ambassador, please consider joining with us in the mission of Bible Translation, so that God's Word will not return to him empty, but will accomplish what he desires and achieve the purpose for which he sent it. NIV Isaiah 55:11

My brothers and sisters in Christ, in this life we will face frustration, ingratitude and opposition, even in the Church. Our human nature may want to quit or destroy the source of irritation. But that would be a loss for all of us. Instead, dwell on the fact that Christ loves you, that he took your sin and died in your place, and made you a new creature reconciled to God. Let that truth fill your heart and mind and compel you to great service in God's kingdom. God grant it to us all. Amen.