

Morningside

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1 Cor 9: 23. I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some

I've been entertained by two Prime Ministers recently. I've been to the cinema and I've seen "Darkest Hour", with its much-praised portrayal of Churchill. Historians point out the inaccuracies and misrepresentations; but there is universal praise for the portrayal of the prime minister. You might say that Gary Oldman plays Churchill at his most Churchillian: this is the master of the House of Commons as British Bulldog. Never mind the ships built on the Clyde, never mind the Battle of Stalingrad, never mind the folly of the Nazi leadership, for the film at least it was the iron will and the impregnable determination and the heroic resistance of Winston Churchill which won the war. *We shall go on to the end. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.*

On the other hand, I've seen the television series "The Crown" and I've seen Harold Macmillan. Again, the verdict of historians may be different, but the only word for the television Macmillan is "wimp". In his day they called him Supermac", but in "The Crown" he is an emotional, psychological and political wimp. He stabs his predecessor in the back, he smiles sheepishly when he goes to see "Beyond the Fringe" and Peter Cook makes a fool of him", he colludes in the infidelity of his wife, and he never, never, stands up for what is right and true. Even the Queen calls him "weak", "a quitter". Spineless. A man, it seems, of no inviolable principles. A vacillator: one thing to this person and something quite different to that person.

A lot of questions are to be asked about the history in both cases; but on screen the contrast between Churchill and Macmillan could not be more dramatic. Which would you rather be?

In First Corinthians 9: 23 Paul declares *I have become all things to all people*. Did you know that that phrase comes from the Bible? The Macmillan Dictionary website (I could not resist choosing the dictionary published by Harold Macmillan's family firm!) explains being all things to all people as *trying to please everyone, especially by doing many different things or by changing your behaviour a great deal*. And it has become a phrase everyone should shrink from deserving. A phrase that describes craven flattery, a personality of jelly, more mouse than man's insincerity from top to toe. Paul declares *I have become all things to all people*. It doesn't sound one bit like Churchill as I saw him last week; but it does sound dreadfully like television's Harold Macmillan.

Can this really be the Bible's St Paul? Can he really be describing himself "All things to all people"? Does he want, actually want to be remembered as a compromiser extraordinary? Is this really St Paul who endured imprisonments and flogging for what he believed in, who was stoned for the sake of the gospel, who was shipwrecked three times as he journeyed on in the name of Christ, through many a sleepless night, often without food, cold and naked? Is this the St Paul who fought the great theological battle of the early church over his determination to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to non-Jews; who went head-to-head with Peter, the most powerful leader the church had known, went head-to-head with Peter .... and won? Can this really be St Paul describing himself as a weakling when he says *I have become all things to all people*? Spineless? A man of jelly? Ready to please at all costs? Or have I not understood what he means? Of course I have not understood what he means. There was never one of more iron will than Paul.

Listen to Paul explaining himself. Christ has made me strong, but I lay aside me strength to put myself alongside those who are weak so that I can understand them and share their lives and tell them of Jesus Christ. Christ has set me free from the Jewish law but I lay aside that freedom so that I can understand Jews and put myself beside them and tell them of Jesus Christ. Christ has given me faith but I lay aside that faith to put myself alongside those who have no faith so that I can understand them and share their lives and tell them of Jesus Christ. Anything in me which stops others being able to hear from me the good news of Jesus Christ I lay aside: because nothing in me matters beside Jesus Christ, and nothing in me will be allowed to prevent others – whoever they are and wherever they find themselves – nothing is to prevent them from hearing of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Spineless no more: this is St Paul as the hero of faith.

Paul Sampley, an American theologian, puts it like this. *Paul goes to people where they are, on their own terms. He does not require that they come to him or that they meet him on his own ground.* St Paul says to anyone and everyone “You don’t have to be a Jew to hear of the love of Christ. Whatever you are I will try to understand and stand with you and share the faith. You don’t have to be a strong person to hear of the love of Christ. Whatever your weaknesses I will try to understand and to stand with you and share the faith. The gospel breaks down walls. The gospel builds bridges.

Half the time it seems that today’s church does the opposite. The message we proclaim can sound like “You have to be like us before you can be one of us”. Unlike Paul saying “I will become like the others so that the others may know Christ”, there is the danger that we say “you must behave like us or believe like us so that you may know Christ”. The Church of Scotland sometimes struggles to be an open, generous and compassionate church. Even a congregation like this one which tries to

engage with a diverse world will have its own struggles to keep the bridges in good repair.

Have you read “To Kill a Mockingbird”? Scout is six years old when she returns from her first day at school. She is disgruntled and disturbed because her teacher is annoyed to discover that Scout can already read. Later in the day Scout tries to help the teacher and the teacher ticks her off. Why was Miss Caroline not pleased with her? Her father’s response becomes the theme of the book, a theme worked out in the hostile context of small-town prejudices about race and learning difficulties. He says to her *You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.* It is that advice which makes Scout the true hero of the book.

And that is exactly what St Paul means by saying *I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some.* Walking around in someone else’s skin It is what made Scout a hero. It is what made St Paul a hero. Breaking down barriers. Building bridges. You don’t have to be St Paul: You don’t have to be the greatest thinker and writer the Christian church has ever seen to do it. You don’t have to be Scout: you don’t have to be a six-year-old child to do it. You could do it. It is called love.

It is called love. That is exactly what St Paul meant by being all things to all people. Today, February 11 would be as good a day as any to try it out.