

No If's, But's or Maybe's

(Geoff New)

1 Cor 16:5-9

⁵ *After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you—for I will be going through Macedonia.*

⁶ *Perhaps I will stay with you for a while, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go.* ⁷ *For I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.* ⁸ *But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost,* ⁹ *because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.*

I'll grant you this. . .

This is an unusual passage of Scripture to be preaching about; someone's uncertain travel plans punctuated by an apparent ministry opportunity and opposition.

It's my hope this morning that we will discover the words in these verses – for all their peculiarity – are actually “words of life” for our “way of life” as a congregation.

It's my hope this morning – as we engage with this passage – you will find comfort and encouragement in the midst of the uncertainties confronting us as a congregation.

That you will see that the oddness of this Scripture is matched by the oddness of our situation; only to see that that in Christ none of this is odd – but quite normal.

Let me explain.

Ruth and I arrived here last June. Nearly a year ago.

In that time there has been an extraordinary amount of movement within the leadership of Leith.

People are coming and going.

- ◆ Luke – the youth pastor – returned to the States. And Ben and Olivia commenced as youth leaders.
- ◆ Three new elders came onto the eldership (Rachel Pettigrew, Fairlie Sim and Russell Elder). Four continued on (Phil Hill, Susan Jack, Bill Lee and Nick Palmer).
- ◆ Annie-Kate Williams commenced as a ministry intern focusing mainly on Student Soul. And joined Ivan Martinez and the team.

And then two weeks ago – all the comings and goings and the uncertainties, pain and anxieties that can be generated by that – was concentrated in the moment when we as a congregation farewelled Helen Harray after 16 years of ministry here.

It seemed to me – as a recent arrival among you – that this was an especially difficult moment. For all the genuinely beautiful words spoken then – there was also a sense of vulnerability and sadness. And even some confusion and dare I say it – a touch of anger.

It seemed to me – generally speaking – you as a congregation are tender at the moment. Understandably - a bit fragile.

Because in addition to Helen's leaving there remains the uncertainty of the what's and wherefores' of Richard Dawson's new role as Moderator of the PCANZ.

If you were here last week, or if you read your emails, you will have learnt that there are now some possibilities of a 2-year replacement for Richard; and that Richard is confronted with whether to take on this new role full-time or part-time.

But the clock is ticking – things are happening – but things are also uncertain.

Between Helen and Richard alone – it could be said that we are losing over 30 years of ministry experience.

How now shall we live?!

Into this then – 1 Cor 16. [And as we journey through this passage – maybe you'd like to hold in your heart the name of someone I have already mentioned or someone else you already have in mind]

1. If's, But's and Maybe's (vv 5-7)

The first half of this reading sums up our situation very well.

It's full of "*If's, But's and Maybe's.*"

Here Paul the Apostle is writing to the church in Corinth about when to expect a visit from him.

Could he be any more indecisive?! Is he coming or going? Is he staying or leaving? If he is staying – for how long?

He'd be a nightmare to travel with. If I'm travelling – I have two printed copies of EVERYTHING (itinerary, tickets, passport etc) and a copy back home.

I am vaccinated for everything. For instance, if a colony of bats flew in here right now and attacked us – I'm good. My rabies shots are up to date.

But Paul! Whoa! Is this really any way to live and travel? As he writes to the Corinthian church about his plans – there are a lot of *if's, but's and maybe's*:

⁶ *Perhaps* I will stay with you for a while, *or even* spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, *wherever* I go. ⁷ . . . *I hope* to spend some time with you, *if* the Lord permits.

Not helping! And trust me – Paul is in no position to wind the Corinthians up any more than they are already have been.

The relationship between Paul and this church was – well – “tense.”

Throughout this letter he has needed to address all manner of problems:

- ◆ Divisions
- ◆ Law suits
- ◆ Sexual immorality
- ◆ Worship wars
- ◆ Super-spiritual space cadets
- ◆ Abuses at communion
- ◆ Confusion and worry about life-after-death
- ◆ Severe challenges to his place as leader

Things are TENSE.

And then he writes the words we're engaging with. Seriously?! It seems like he's just adding to the angst. With all these *If's*, *But's* and *Maybe's*.

And even in verse 6 – where he writes “perhaps”; that is pretty much the only time in the New Testament this word appears. So he even seems to reserve a particular word for them to further increase the anxiety and uncertainty.

With respect – maybe with all this uncertainty maybe we have a church in Corinth who understands what we're going through here at Leith.

So now what?

Well – it’s a thing of beauty. For all the *If’s, But’s and Maybe’s* – Paul is certain about a couple of things.

One is his request in verse 6: “help me on my journey, wherever I go.”

In the midst of *If’s, But’s and Maybe’s* – he makes this appeal: help me on my journey, wherever I go.”

This phrase – “help me on my journey” – is actually a technical phrase. It is a phrase loaded with a spirit of hospitality. And at the time of writing – was even something that was particular to the Christian community.

It has the sense of missionary endeavour about it. The Gospel going here and there.

Impacting this life and that life. Transforming this community and that community.

Embedded in it is the message that “I need your help. I can’t get to where I need to get to without your help in whatever form. Financial, encouragement, or even your physical presence and company *on* the journey.”

The beautiful thing is that when it is used elsewhere in the New Testament – there is often a tag line with it. Like a movie tag-line. A particular flavour and expression to it:

- ◆ Rom 15 – help me on my way: *once I have enjoyed your company* (that’s fellowship)
- ◆ 1 Cor 16:11 – help [Timothy] on his way *in peace* (that’s unity)
- ◆ Titus 3 – help [Zenas and Apollos] on their way *and see they have everything they need* (that’s generosity)
- ◆ 3 John – help them on their way *in a manner worthy of God* (that’s reverence)

But here in the text before us – it might seem mildly disappointing by comparison; “help me on my way, *wherever I go.*”

Just seems to add to the sense of uncertainty again.

Not so. “Wherever I go” – that’s trust. Because soon after this phrase Paul reminds us of the Lord’s presence in it all.

“If the Lord permits” (v 7).

I want to suggest this.

In the midst of all the *If’s, But’s and Maybe’s* here in 1 Cor 16 and here at Leith: this phrase in verse 6 is calling us to a particular kind of presence and being.

As leaders come and go – as *anyone* comes and goes – they are greeted with and accompanied by this kind of companionship and enabling.

That undergirding it all is a sense of missionary endeavour marked by hospitality, companionship and trust in the Lord.

That for all this uncertainty, comings and goings (for whatever reason) is ultimately under the Lordship of Christ.

Despite our frailty, fragility and flaws.

In the midst of the *If's, But's and Maybe's* our response – according to 1 Cor 16 – is to help people on their way. And if we anchor our experience to 1 Cor 16 – we do so in a spirit of trust in the Lord as He permits.

To respond to this call to “help me on my journey wherever I go” in the Spirit of Christ and with His enablement and involvement is a thing of beauty.

Let me give you an example.

A couple of years before Ruth and I left Papakura East Presbyterian Church (PEPC) – a woman began attending with her husband and young family. Her name is Hyeun at the time she was completing her PhD. She is a very competent counsellor especially in trauma. She is a minister and wonderful disciple of Jesus.

Their first time at a worship service was when we were farewelling our youth pastor after 8 years of ministry. It was VERY emotional.

She couldn't believe it; their first time at church and a key leader leaving. She later told me *every church* she attended – the minister seemed to leave within a very short time. But I knew that it wasn't going to happen with “this minister.”

Not so. I was appointed to Dean of Studies (Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership) and in the weeks and months as we prepared to leave Hyeun proved invaluable in helping us all in our journey wherever we went.

She coached me and Ruth and the eldership in how to say goodbye and keep things intact.

She literally helped us in our journey. But the real surprise came after a few months in my new role.

Steve Taylor (my boss) came into my office one day and asked how I would feel about Hyeun co-teaching the pastoral care course! (“Let me think about that . . . yes!”)

Which we now do. And in the first session we taught together – there was a moment in the class when I was overcome with emotion in the telling of a story. Her skill – her help on the journey in that moment – was grace filled and God-infused.

In June – we will co-teach again and the subject matter is such that her expertise and skill will take that session to a whole new level. I am utterly overwhelmed at her help on the journey and what the Lord has permitted.

My point is – in the midst of all the *If's, But's and Maybe's* we are experiencing – here in 1 Cor 16 is a vision and a way by which we are called to respond.

We are called to help people on their journey wherever they go. In a spirit of hospitality, companionship and trust in the Lordship of Christ.

It's an appropriate faith response in the midst of *If's, But's and Maybe's*.

2. No *If's, But's and Maybe's* (vv 8-9)

If the first part of this text is marked by *If's, But's and Maybe's* – the second half isn't.

There's no *If's, But's and Maybe's* about it.

Let me tell you a story. I first heard this over 40 years ago when I was in primary school. It's stayed with me ever since.

The story is set in medieval times. And there lived a King. He was a cruel man and he had a beautiful daughter.

In his royal court there was a young, tall, handsome and strong knight. The knight and princess fell in love – but due to the knight's station in life, their love for each other needed to remain a secret.

However – one day the king discovered the truth and he sentenced the knight to the king's own specially designed punishment.

The whole city gathered into a great arena. And there on the middle of the arena the knight was led out. All around him sat the citizens of the city and above and before him sat the king with his daughter seated next to him.

There – set into the wall of the arena – were two great oak doors.

Behind one was the fiercest unfed tiger that could be found.

Behind the other was a maiden from the royal court especially chosen as being a perfect match for the knight.

The punishment? The knight is given the decision to choose one of the doors; his fate lay behind it.

Either death by the tiger or marriage to the beautiful maiden.

All eyes were on the knight. *His* eyes were on the princess. He knew that she would know what was behind each door.

And she did. She sat there. Knowing which one concealed the tiger; and which one concealed the beautiful maiden.

She knew the woman too. And she hated her. She couldn't be certain – but maybe she was – but she thought she had seen her knight and this woman exchange glances in the royal court. She thought she had seen snatched conversations. Maybe flirting. Maybe. She couldn't be sure.

But now before her stood the love of her life; either about to lose his life or her about to lose hers should he be given in marriage to this woman.

Her love for him was only matched by her hate for the woman.

He stood there pleading with his eyes: which door?

No one else saw it as everyone was transfixed on the knight. But she very slightly indicated with her hand: the right door.

He suppressed his smile of knowledge, love and gratitude and strode to the door – the right hand one – and pulled back on the heavy oak door. . .

Like I said – I heard that story over 40 years ago – and I *still* don't know what's behind that door!

But here in 1 Cor 16 – there's no doubt.

Verses 8 – 9 *But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.*

No *If's, But's and Maybe's* about it.

There is a great door for effective work opened AND many who oppose me.

Not a resigned “*but* there is opposition; not “I’ll go through this door *if* there is not opposition”; not “given there is opposition *maybe* I’ll go through.”

No – for Paul it’s the reality it’s no surprise. (cf 1 Peter 4:12 *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.*)

No *If's, But's and Maybe's* about it.

To refer back to our story – no need to choose which doors. Both open.

Behind one is the Bride of Christ (the church) and the other (as Peter puts it in 1 Peter 5:8) – a roaring lion seeking to devour.

Do you know that whenever the New Testament uses the metaphor of a door to represent a ministry opportunity – suffering and/or evil is always present in some form? Oh – and a God greater than that!

What might that do to our use of the term?

For Paul at least there were no *If's, But's and Maybe's* about it.

There in Ephesus the work and power of God was breath-taking.

And the date stamp that Paul wants to wait there until Pentecost in itself is full of meaning – that great festival redefined by the pouring out of the Spirit as described in Acts 2.

Time does not allow us to engage with the story of the Gospel impacting Ephesus. But in Acts 19-20 the story is told.

Here in 1 Cor 16:0 – Paul tells the story of Ephesus in these few words: *a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.*

It's happening here at Ephesus. It can happen at Corinth. It can happen at Leith.

In the midst of all the *If's, But's and Maybe's* what God can do is breath-taking.

There was a time at PEPC not dissimilar to what's happening here. Lots of leaders and people leaving for legitimate reasons.

As I reflected on the events which had wounded, bruised and cut us, it occurred to me that a particular day in history gave voice to our state.

That day? The Saturday during the events of the first Easter.

The day stranded between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Saturday. Scripture does not specifically describe the state of the disciples on that day but from the rest of the narrative we know they did not expect the events of Good Friday much less the events of Easter Sunday. Stranded between grief and unexpected joy.

Between darkness and unimagined light. Between death and resurrection. Stranded. That's what I told my congregation. I told them we were in Easter Saturday because the texture of our community soul was the same; bewildered. It struck me also that there was a name for this Saturday: Sabbath. So for all of this, at the heart of it, we rest. Sabbath. A special Sabbath because the next day is Easter Sunday. Resurrection Day.

It is a curious thing but churches do not like rest. We do not like to wait. But sometimes that's the only thing left to do.

“Nothing.”

About six weeks after realising exactly which day of the week we were in, Resurrection Sunday dawned.

Our present mission received new life in the form of utterly unexpected approaches of help and assistance from within and without the congregation. Life exploded.

In terms of the opposition that was experienced in Ephesus – there was a range of how that opposition presented itself.

But for our purposes – just one of those will suffice.

We've seen in 1 Cor 16:6 the phrase which is forming our response to uncertainty: helping each other on the journey wherever we go.

We saw that phrase appears in a few other places in the New Testament – each time with a distinct twist.

In the telling of the story of Ephesus in Acts – the story ends with Paul having a very emotional parting with the elders of the church there.

He gifts parting words and advice. And do you know the very last thing that is recorded in Acts 20 as they finally part?

It's our phrase from 1 Cor 16:6 – the elders literally accompanied him to the ship on which he was leaving.

So let's take that as our common denominator between the church of Corinth, the church of Ephesus and the church of Leith.

That phrase punctuates the final conversation.

And just before it marks the end of Paul's final words to them - he warned them of opposition not from without as much as from within (Acts 20):

²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹ So be on your guard!

Am I saying you need to be aware of your brother or sister sitting next to you? That they might be the source of opposition in this uncertain climate?

Oh no! No – I'm not saying that.

I'm not saying that they might be the problem; I'm saying that *you* could be the problem!

Let's take our lead from the disciples at the Last Supper. When Jesus says someone will betray Him – they all said in turn “Surely not I Lord?”

When Ruth and I left PEPC – in my final sermon I reflected on our time there. I made mention that I left with one frustration with myself:

How slow at times I was to discern evil at work within our midst. Eventually and always evil will overplay its hand. Always.

But late in the piece I realised one way to recognise evil.

- ◆ “Evil” is “live” spelt backwards.
- ◆ “Devil” is “Lived” spelt backwards.

If you want to smoke out evil – look for reversal of Gospel life.

To take a lead from the prayer of Francis of Assisi (and turning his prayer around):

*Where there is hatred instead of love;
injury instead of pardon;
doubt instead of faith;
despair instead of hope;
darkness instead of light;
sadness instead of joy.*

. . . there you will probably find evil at work. Among us.

Let me finish with another story. It’s fiction – parable-like even. You’ll get the point:

There once was a monastery set a little way outside of a town and near a forest.

Over the centuries this monastic order had times of highs and lows; of persecution and growth.

But at the time of our story – it was truly a dying order.

The community now only numbered 5. The Abbot and 4 brothers. None of them younger than 70 years old.

This community of brothers knew that they could not last. It was years and years since a novice had joined them.

Now in the forest nearby – there was a small cottage. And on occasions the local rabbi from the town would retreat to there for prayer and reflection.

Over the years – the monks somehow became attuned to the rabbi's presence and would say to each other "The rabbi is here."

One day when the rabbi was praying in the cottage – the monks gathered around the Abbot and suggested that he go to the rabbi and ask for advice about what to do.

So the Abbot went and knocked on the cottage door and received a warm welcome – especially given it was the first time they had ever met.

The Abbot explained the predicament the monastery was in and asked for the rabbi's counsel.

But alas – the rabbi had no advice. Instead he too lamented the lack of interest from people and the young; and that they too at the synagogue were experiencing their own form of death and decline.

And so they read the Torah together, wept and prayed.

As the Abbot was leaving – he turned to the rabbi and asked once again: “Is there nothing you can advise us?”

“No” said the rabbi, “Only this – one of you is the messiah.”

The Abbot returned and the brothers gathered around. He related what had happened; and the cryptic and mysterious final comment: “One of us is the messiah.”

Over the coming months; this comment stayed with them.

“Surely it is the Abbot – he is so wise and faithful. But it couldn't be Brother Alfred. He's so annoying. Yet he is right most of the time; actually – all of the time. Surely it's not Alfred.

But it can't be Brother Philip. He's so quiet. Yet does seem to just appear when you most need someone. Is it Philip? But at least I'm sure it's not me. Is it Lord? Oh please – not me!”

And so they began to treat each other with dignity, respect and love on the off-chance that one of them was the messiah. And treating themselves with self-respect that on the off-off-chance THEY were the messiah.

And over time – as the townsfolk picnicked in the nearby forest and travelled by – they noticed that this previously ailing community of brothers emanated a particular quality of light, love and life.

The kind of beauty that touched lives and inspired lives. And over time this community and the community around them was touched and changed by the touching changes in that community of faith.

The Messiah – the Lord Jesus Christ – is among us, within us, before us and behind us.

In the midst of all these *if's, but's and maybe's* we're facing:

- ◆ Inspiring the way by which we help each other on the journey wherever we go.
- ◆ Opening great doors for effective ministry.
- ◆ Giving us wisdom and courage in the presence of opposition.

No *if's, but's or maybe's* about it.

