**13th January 2019**

**1 Corinthians 1**

I said on Christmas Eve at the midnight service as we were waiting to celebrate the birth of Jesus how challenging it is to receive certain kinds of presents. Some gifts by their very nature make you swallow your pride. Imagine opening a present on Christmas morning from a friend – and it’s a dieting book. Then you open the wrappings on another present and it’s a book on ‘overcoming selfishness’. ‘Thank you sooo much’ That’s just what I needed! For indeed I am fat and obnoxious! Perhaps you had a friend who figured out you were in financial trouble and came to you and offered you money to get you out of the predicament. You probably found you had to swallow your pride.

There has never been a gift offered that makes you swallow your pride to the depths that the gift of Jesus Christ requires you to do. To accept we need a Saviour. We need a light to shine in our darkness. It asks for our humility.

But it is a humility that is reciprocated by God who came down to us, who humbled himself, even to death on a cross, to love and forgive and make new. Christmas I said is a battle of humility: our humility in accepting God’s humility. It is a stumbling block to many and an offence to a world that likes to think we are in control, we can fix our own problems, we can do it. We don’t need a Saviour!

Paul in this opening chapter of his letter to the Corinthians repeats the name of Christ over and over again. It is his central concern and his central claim. Christ Jesus is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles but to those whom god has called, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Do not boast in anything else he says. Keep Christ central to all you are and all you do as a church is his opening salvo.

Over the next two months we are going through this letter, pertinent at a time when we are discerning who we are now as a church, what is our vision and our mission for the next decade. Paul is writing to a church he established around 50-52 AD (AD Jeremy Paxman – we don’t want to airbrush out our Christian heritage) Corinth was an important port and cosmopolitan city in Greece. It was a mixing of cultures and values from Greek to roman. We would call it a multicultural context today. There was a range of faiths to choose from and a range of lifestyles tolerated. Corinth was known for its corruption and its licentiousness, its permissiveness. In ancient days ‘to Corinthians’ someone was to lead them astray into drunken and sexual debauchery.

The letter as we will find reveals a church that instead of maturing in the intervening period between the apostle Paul’s departure and his writing of this letter , had developed a remarkable number of serious problems, including division; abuse of the sacraments and the rich trampling over the poor; disorder in worship, theological confusion over such doctrines as the resurrection and the proper exercise of Christian’s liberty and freedom in the gospel and the extremes of moral laxity – like members of the church cavorting with prostitutes and having incestual relations, to an unhealthy legalistic puritanism being separate from anything that could pollute your faith. What approach will keep this church holy?

Secondly the Corinthians appear to suffer from what has been grandly called an ‘over realized eschatology’. Let me explain. They believed that they had already attained spiritual perfection. They could do what they liked. They didn’t realize that we have an incomplete spiritual experience of Christ, that we still have indwelling sin in our lives – no one is perfect yet. That will come the other side of eternity.

They also believed that Jesus was going to return imminently. Like tomorrow. This sense of urgency affected their thinking and their living. Why get married because Jesus is coming back. It’s the end of the world lets go out and get a prostitute. Paul has to calm them down and centre them again in their relationship to Christ and to each other.

In these opening paragraphs he is full of love for them and thankfulness that they believe in Jesus and he reminds them to make Christ the centre of their understanding of the world and of history and of their church. But he recognizes the urgency of the times:

*Therefore, you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.****8****He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ*.

Paul wants them to keep that sense of urgency and anxiety about the Lord’s return to press on in faith, seek the spiritual gifts, stay firm in the faith.

We may have lost that sense of urgency about the Lord returning. There is in wider society a sense of urgency and anxiety about how Brexit will work out and this is a crucial week for the government, and they need our prayers for wisdom. There is an urgency and anxiety for our world and the effect of climate change and how we respond today not tomorrow.

What about in our Christian life and the life of the church. Do we have a sense of urgency to press on in our Christian maturity, seeking spiritual growth spiritual gifts to use for the work of the Body of Christ? Do we have an urgency to share the hope we have in Christ? Do we have an urgency to tell people of our Saviour? When people have low self-esteem, when social media tells them they don’t look attractive enough or don’t have the right lifestyle, do we have an urgency to share with them that our security comes from the love of Christ; when people put their hopes in materialism, money, power status – do we have an urgency to say that the only thing that saves is the cross of Christ; when people are searching for truth and spiritual experiences and are looking for it in occult activity, or joining cults like the Jehovah Witnesses – do we have an urgency to point them to Jesus , the way the truth and the life Paul is urging these Corinthians to preach Christ crucified in the power of God. Let us be eager to do that.

From verse 10- 17 Paul tackles one of the problems at Corinth: division.

*My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you.****12****What I mean is this: one of you says, ‘I follow Paul’; another, ‘I follow Apollos’; another, ‘I follow Cephas[*[*b*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+1&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-28376b)*]’; still another, ‘I follow Christ.’*

***13****Is Christ divided?*

This is timely passage as the country is bitterly divided over Brexit and this week in Parliament we are expected to fall into constitutional crisis as the government is defeated on its Brexit deal. Sadly, we don’t have the commonality and appeal to unity that Paul presents here – namely our relationship to Christ.

This week we also prepare for the week of prayer for Christian Unity which starts this week and we have the united service next Sunday evening.

What had happened, not long after Paul had left Corinth, a gifted preacher turned up called Apollos and many people decided that they preferred his teaching, style and methods and perhaps content, to Paul’s. Go to any church where two preachers have worked side by side in quick succession and you will find people comparing them. That’s natural; but how easily it can pass into factions and rivalry: ‘I’m with Apollos’. Some also claimed to follow Cephas – Peter, or even Christ – perhaps this was Paul’s ironic comment that there is a well-known power play in church now as then, where people say ‘well we’ve heard your opinion; now let me tell you what the Lord thinks about it all! ‘I’m with Jesus!’

It’s a sobering thought that the church faced such division and rivalry in tis earliest years.

But he doesn’t just knock heads together, although there is a bit of that in verse 13:

***13****Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised in the name of Paul?*

As if you all carve up Jesus and have a bit of him. Yet it does make the main point that Jesus is the one who matters and all the others from the most senior apostle to the youngest convert are simply members in his body. It doesn’t matter who baptized you – that formal outward sign that you were leaving an old identity behind and starting a new life I Christ and his church. The only name to be baptized into was the name of Christ. The person who did the baptizing was quite irrelevant.

The relevant fact and here we get to the heart of Paul’s argument, was the clash between the good news of Jesus, the power of the cross and the apparent power of human wisdom and charisma for want of a better word.

Paul has just been in Athens a centre of learning and sophistication, Corinth too had its visiting intellectual teachers , philosophers and wise people. He wants to make a point that you have to choose between the wisdom of the world and the power of the cross.

There a saying:

If our greatest need had been information God would have sent us an educator

If our greatest need had been technology God would have sent us a scientist

If our greatest need had been money God would have sent us an economist

If our greatest ned had been pleasure God would have sent us an entertainer

But our greatest need was forgiveness and peace – so God sent us a saviour.

**2**Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, **23**but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, **24**but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

I read a book ‘Letters to the Church’ over the New year by Francis Chan, an American pastor who founded a church with just twenty members that grew to be a mega church of 10,000. Then he walked away from it and went back to be a pastor of small house churches.

He writes:

I have been in church leadership for thirty years. I spent years asking myself ‘what will work?’ and by that, I mean, ‘what will get more people to attend gatherings?’ this isn’t necessarily a bad thing. My intention was that I wanted more people interested in Christ, and I wanted to see their lives changed. In my zeal for results, however, I neglected some of His commands. Paul didn’t do this. In this first chapter of 1 Corinthians you see that Paul is far more zealous for the salvation of others than any of us. Yet in his pursuit of people, he was still careful to guard what was sacred.

Paul was careful to refrain from using merely human rhetoric and make sure the Spirit’s power was predominant. I was busy doing whatever worked. I learned how to keep an auditorium filled. I learned how to give people the experience they wanted.

Paul rose above all this. The Corinthians wanted Paul to preach with eloquence like the skilled orators they enjoyed listening to, but Paul refused. They wanted a preacher who would give them the best of human wisdom, but Paul gave them the opposite. He actually limited his words because he didn’t want to diminish the cross of its power. He wanted their faith to rest on the Spirit’s power. They wanted a Christian celebrity they could all praise, but Paul refused to let it be about him.

He gave them what they needed and what was best for them rather than what they were demanding.

The temptation is always to make the church more popular. It is an old game that usually never works out well.

In 19th century Denmark Soren Kierkegaard was appalled at the state church, which he believed had grown apathetic and insincere. Kierkegaard believed that true Christianity was costly and demands humility. Because the gospel exposes our failures and insists that we can find life only through the grace of God, our self esteem comes under attack as we acknowledge that Jesus alone saves. But what Kierkegaard saw in the Church were constant attempts to make Christianity more palatable, more popular and less offensive. He said if we strip away the offence from Christianity and try to make things fun and easy for everyone, ‘then lock the churches, the sooner the better, or turn them into places of amusement which stand open all day long!’

Alan Hirsch explained his experience with building a mega church in Australia like Francis Chan had in America. ‘If you have to use marketing and the lures of entertainment to attract people, then you will have to keep them there on the same principle because that is what people buy into. Win them with entertainment and you have to keep them there by entertaining them. For a whole lot of reasons this commitment gets harder year after year. We end up creating a whip for our own backs.

Francis Chan concludes: too often we think if we offer just the right services or package the gospel in just the right way so no one gets offended, we can convince people to stay. By catering our worship to the worshippers and not to the Object of our worship, I fear we have created human centred churches.

Paul was having none of it. He preached Christ crucified. A stumbling block to some, an offence to others – so be it because it was also the power of god to save lives and bring hope to a hopeless world. The Jews saw it a scandal that the Messiah would suffer and die – Messiah’s by definition don’t do that. And certainly, don’t forgive their enemies in the process. Dead men don’t rise either. simply to suggest that would invite mockery – then as now. Paul had no illusions then about the gospel message. So, when he announced it, he didn’t use clever words to trick people due to his sparkling style. He didn’t spin good sentences together and tease them into seeing the point. The cross had to do its own work. Simply telling the story released a power of quite a different sort from any power that human speech could have: God’s power, beside which all human power looks weak; god’s wisdom, beside which all human learning looks like folly.

The point of the gospel is all about God dying on a rubbish heap at the wrong end of the roman empire, loving the unlovable, forgiving the unforgivable. Its’ all about God confronting the world of posturing, power and prestige and overthrowing all that for a kingdom in which the weak and the foolish find themselves just as welcome as the strong and the wise, if not more so. When your faith is Christ centred – you refer back to Jesus himself, not your favourite preacher – you think about the people Jesus befriended, not the lifestyle of your favourite preacher, and you ask yourself whether Paul is not being utterly loyal to his master.

Jesus is lord because God raised him from the dead and is the power for salvation for all who believe.

May God gives us the urgency to preach Christ crucified and may the power of God be at work.

Bibliography:

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