**19th January 2020**

**1 Corinthians 1.1-9**

There is a school of thought that if you want to criticize someone or tell them off – then start with the positives first. Find something to praise them for or butter them up with before you then turn on the heat.

This week’s reading from 1 Corinthians is an extended greeting[[1]](#endnote-1) that strikes a sustained note of encouragement. All this before Paul then goes on to tackle key issues in the church and challenge, even chastise them over many issues.

Is this how we greet each other in church? Or do we jump in with the latest problems and grumbles? In a social media environment of negativity, a positive environment of mutual encouragement could be seen as a powerful witness. Paul seems to be saying, ‘Remember who you are’ and perhaps, to himself, ‘I must remember who you are’ – a message for today’s Church and the world of self-respect, and mutual respect.

Who am I? How do I know who I am? The question of how we understand ourselves and our identity is hugely complex. Tomes of sociological and psychological theory have been written addressing this topic. Most basically, identity is tied up with what we believe about ourselves and about the world around us.

Paul’s opening remarks to the Corinthians are interesting, because he is writing to a community wrought with division and in crisis about what they believed and as a result who they understood themselves to be. Anyone who’s ever experienced a crisis of identity will know it can be a pretty destabilising experience.

Rather than open with criticism and condemnation, Paul affirms the Corinthians’ worth by thanking God for them. But he does this by thanking God for who they find themselves to be in the light of God’s grace and in Christ Jesus, which sounds a bit like a backhanded compliment. In fact, what Paul seems to be doing is reminding them that their identity is rooted in God and in God’s provision to them.

I quoted Jonnie Hill’s comments from the Daily Devotion of the URC last week when he said he was reminded of some words attributed to Archbishop Justin Welby, when in 2016 he made the shock discovery that the man who he believed to be his father was not in fact his biological father. He said, “I know that I find who I am in Jesus Christ, not in genetics, and my identity in him never changes”.

According to Acts 18, Paul arrived in Corinth in AD 49 or 50 and stayed there for 18 months, lodging with a Jewish couple, Aquila and Priscilla (originally from Rome, we are told).[[2]](#endnote-2) At first, Paul preached in the synagogue and made a number of converts to Jesus as Messiah. But the main body of Jews took against Paul and brought him before the proconsul, Gallio, who threw the case out. Paul stayed on in Corinth until he sailed to Ephesus, from where he wrote this letter sometime around AD 55.

The letter begins with a conventional introduction, and then has a passage where Paul butters up the Corinthians before criticizing them in the following section. The significance of this is that Paul introduces some of the vocabulary that he uses in his theology here and elsewhere. First, he calls himself an ‘apostle’ – one who has been ‘sent’ with a mission and a witness to the resurrection. However, by the time of 2 Corinthians, some were questioning his right to call himself an apostle (2 Corinthians 12.11ff.).

Issues of who is leading this church, who has authority, who has wisdom are key issues in the first few chapters. In a multi faith setting, there are pressures on the Corinthians to accommodate other faiths and practices. Paul will stress the centrality of Christ and the power of the cross. He will deal with issues of taking part in pagan temple rituals, especially using temple prostitutes; eating food sacrificed to idols and taking part in pagan worship. He will address sexual conduct and immorality, sexual exploitation, marriage and singleness. He will call out the inequalities between rich and poor in the Corinthian church and the lack of respect for each other at the Lord’s Supper. He will consider the right use of spiritual gifts, the importance of love, and the doubts of the congregation about the resurrection of Jesus. The letter was written two thousand years ago – but addresses issues still with us today.

But at the start of the letter there is affirmation and a realization that whatever beef he has with these people they are still the church of God, sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy people.

 ‘Church’ here refers to the Christian community in the city of Corinth, a small group of perhaps a few dozen believers in a largely pagan city with an established Jewish community and its own synagogue. Paul uses the word ‘church’ (our translation of the Greek, *ekklsia*), but this can’t have meant a building. Christianity didn’t exist as an entity separate from Judaism at this time, so would not have had its own buildings. His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, says, ‘The Church is not built with bricks and stones. The Church is built with love in the hearts.’ In this week of prayer for Christian Unity, what ‘love in the hearts’ might provide a unifying identity for today’s diverse Church?

The divisions between Christians have had all sorts of consequences, sometimes becoming intertwined with political rifts. The leaders of Ireland’s main churches have united to [welcome the power-sharing deal](https://www.presbyterianireland.org/News/January-2020/Church-Leaders-%E2%80%98Deal-offers-new-hope%E2%80%99.aspx) which will see the restoration of Stormont’s political institutions. They say in their statement: ‘The story of the Christian faith is one of new beginnings, where failure is never final, second chances abound, and all things can be renewed.’ Peace is never once and for all – it requires continuous negotiation and willingness to compromise.

Those in the church are called ‘saints’. Despite their sometimes wayward behaviour, they have been sanctified by the Holy Spirit at baptism and are called to holiness – set apart for God’s purposes. Secular society recognizes ‘callings’ – mostly to caring and service. How do we understand the Christian calling ‘to be saints’?

They have received ‘grace’ – what St Thomas Aquinas called ‘the assistance of God’. They have been strengthened by ‘spiritual gifts’ so that they may remain blameless and faithful on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

These people have been enriched in Christ Jesus in every way and Paul is praying they stay firm to the end in Christ. How have you been enriched by Jesus?

Simon Ponsonby[[3]](#endnote-3) is on the leadership team of a large UK church, speaking at events and writing books about Christianity, but after 30 years of ministry, he realized that his passion for Jesus was growing cold. He explains how he found his way back to his first love. He writes:

After 30 years in ministry I was worn out and part of me was wanting out. Ministry had sucked the life out of me.

I felt bruised, jaded with much of church life, disappointed at the drift in my denomination (Church of England), sad at seeing friends and former role models falling into serious moral failure, doctrinal error or throwing in the towel on church.

I was not aware of any glaring sin in my own life, but God seemed distant and I was becoming apathetic and cynical. I didn't like what I saw in me. I was spiritually dry, and physically tired, and mentally anxious and depressed. I snatched comfort in eating and drinking a little too much and hiding in my hobbies. I spent more time with the latter than the Lord. I was not in a good place.

Then in March 2019 I attended the funeral of evangelist and theologian, [Michael Green](https://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/Michael-Green-1930-2019-Remembering-the-infectious-joy-of-this-exceptional-evangelist).

Michael was one of the outstanding Church leaders of the last 40 years. What struck me at his funeral, as I listened to the contributions and testimonies, was that this man was ablaze with the love of Jesus.

At the age of 88 he was still passionately preaching Jesus on student missions, still witnessing to the hospital staff nursing him, still handing out booklets to strangers that he had written about Jesus. He was all about Jesus. And people wanted to know the Jesus they saw and encountered in him.

Michael’s single-minded focus moved me and indeed provoked me. Had I become so caught up in working for the Lord that I had lost the Lord of the work? Probably. Martha was dutifully preoccupied with many things for Jesus but neglected “what is better”; the option her sister Mary took by sitting and gazing on Jesus. I knew I needed to begin again at the beginning, and return to my first love, Jesus.

Shortly after Michael’s funeral I was meditating on the gospels and was struck by how often the response to Jesus from those who met him was amazement. As I pondered this, Jesus presented himself afresh to me. Words tumbled out as I sat in a café, tears rolling down my face trying to capture what I was seeing – just how amazing Jesus is.

Three decades ago I became a minister because I had met Jesus and he transformed my life and I wanted to tell the world about him. Somewhere that vision of Jesus became blurred, and the ministry had bizarrely pushed Jesus to the periphery. No longer. An evangelist of an earlier generation, Gypsy Smith, once said of Jesus: “I have never lost the wonder of it all.”  I don't ever want to either.

How do we fall in love with Jesus all over again?

First and foremost, we find Jesus revealed in his Word: “These are the very scriptures that testify about me” said Jesus (John 5:39) and we need to immerse ourselves in this ocean of revelation. All the while praying that God would reveal Jesus to us.

Steep yourselves in the gospels. Read them over and over and over.

Secondly, we need to ask the Spirit to reveal Jesus. Much of prayer to and for the Spirit has been for power for ministry, and that is surely appropriate to pray. Less so has been the prayer that the Spirit would conform me to Christlikeness. But specifically, Jesus tells us the Spirit will make him known and lead us into all truth, the Spirit sublimates himself in the son, shines the spotlight on the son, fills us with the height and depth and length and breadth of Christ’s love. Seek the spirit to know Jesus nearer and dearer and clearer.

In Donald Miller’s superb book *Blue Like Jazz* – he recalls a friend of his, Alan, who was researching ‘successful’ churches and interviewing big church leaders. He visited Bill Bright, one of the most influential Christian leaders in the twentieth century – founder of Campus Crusade which has some 25,000 missionaries in 200 countries. Alan was shown into a grand office and sat there behind a big desk was “a big man, full of life, who listened attentively and engaged with the interview”.

The final question put to him was: “What does Jesus mean to you?” Bill Bright just started to cry. This big man, sat there in a big chair, behind his big desk, wept. Donald Miller comments: “When Alan told me the story I wondered what it was like to love Jesus that way. To cry at the very mention of the name Jesus…I knew then, I would like to know Jesus like that.”  Me too.

Paul starts this difficult letter by reminding the Corinthians of who they are and perhaps reminding himself who they are before he addresses any concerns he has about them.

In this Christian Unity week may God unite us, enrich us and amaze us in the love of Christ.

1. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/105-january-february-2020-a/epiphany-2/explore-respond> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/105-january-february-2020-a/epiphany-2/bible-notes> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/Simon-Ponsonby-How-I-came-back-to-Jesus-my-first-love> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)