**16th February 2020**

**1 Corinthians 3.1-11**

It was Valentine’s Day on Friday. I always hated Valentine’s Day – mainly because I never got any cards.

One year whilst at university, friends of mine posted up a notice in an all-female hall of residence that said about me ‘Lonely Heart – please take pity – send him a Valentine’ I didn’t know about this and got a few cards on valentine’s Day and felt all made up. Until someone let slip about the humiliating prank.

I have sent Valentine’s cards when I was a single man with mixed results.

One girl was so impressed with the quality of the card and the verse that she thought it was from another guy.

One year I disguised my handwriting by cutting up printed words from a newspaper and sticking them on to the card. This totally freaked out the girl who got the card because she thought it was a bit sinister – the kind of card you get from a hostage taker or serial killer!

I’ve been dumped by girls and I’ve dumped girls. None of those experiences have been particularly nice.

However, they have all been part of growing up. Now as a parent you want to protect your kids from those experiences yet at the same time realize those kinds of experiences are necessary to make them mature individuals.

Here’s the uncomfortable truth:

Growth often takes place in times of pain, suffering, dispute, conflict than it does when everything is going well, and life is wonderful. Those times of dislocation, challenge, conflict, pain can be the seed bed for growth if you respond to them in spiritual and wise ways.

Much loved British TV chat-show icon, Phillip Schofield,[[1]](#endnote-1) [was commended for his bravery](https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/feb/07/phillip-schofields-statement-is-huge-moment-for-gay-community) on announcing live, on the very show he co-presents with Holly Willoughby, that: ‘With the strength and support of my wife and daughters, I’ve been coming to terms with the fact that I’m gay’. As someone who remembers watching Phillip when he began in children’s television back in the mid 1980’s, I also remember that our world was a very different place back then.

Many like to think of the United Kingdom as progressive, but it wasn’t that long ago that what Phillip did this week would have been unacceptable to the entertainment establishment. Many of his friends and colleagues supported him this week, as his inner strength and conviction seem to have matured to the point where he felt able to share something so personal. Does his announcement change him fundamentally as a person? No, I don’t think so. But maybe it does say something about a change in the diversity of our society, that an individual can at last feel able to grow to the point where they are able to be honest with themselves and those they love most about who they are.

At the Oscars awards it was Oscar and BAFTA ‘Best Actor’ award winner, Joaquin Phoenix, whose admittedly off-the-wall [acceptance speech was almost worthy of award itself](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/feb/10/joaquin-phoenix-oscars-speech) in the eyes of many. Joaquin [Phoenix was upset that some of his worthy fellow actors were not getting the same recognition as him](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/feb/10/joaquin-phoenixs-oscars-speech-in-full), while he was also honest enough to admit to not having done enough himself in the past to make sure the films he worked in were diverse. He said, ‘I’m grateful that so many of you in this room have given me a second chance. I think that’s when we’re at our best: when we support each other. Not when we cancel each other out for our past mistakes, but when we help each other to grow. When we educate each other; when we guide each other to redemption – that is the best of humanity.’

Paul might well begin by berating his brothers and sisters in Corinth for their divisions, but it might also be that he is celebrating the diversity which is bringing them to the maturity of recognizing their oneness in Christ. In 1 Corinthians 3.1-9, Paul begins by referring to the already dramatically changed individuals, who together make up the new community, as immature.

Imagine how you would feel if someone called you immature?

Why does he describe them as immature? Their disunity, rivalry, jealousy and quarrelling lead him to comment that it’s as if they’re still restricted to baby food. He knows that they’ve come a long way from their old pagan, multi-god beliefs, but he also acknowledges that they still have a lot of growing-up to do. This they must do before they will be ready to appreciate the significance of being part of a mature fellowship of Jesus Christ. Maturity, it seems, is about not getting side-tracked onto the importance of individual teachers (e.g. Paul or Apollos), but instead being able to focus only on Christ. Paul uses both planting and watering as metaphors for the Gospel from which the Corinthian church will grow towards redemption.

Paul says that he could not speak to the Corinthian Christians as a spiritual people, as those who could digest adult food. Imagine how they received that comment! Paul would like to place this in the past, but he says that they are still not ready for solid food, even now. ‘Solid food’ must be the revelation of God’s wisdom that he refers to in the previous chapter.

Paul also says that the Corinthians are still ‘of the flesh’. This expression is easily misunderstood. Normally in Paul’s writing, ‘flesh’ does not refer to the physical body, nor is this a reference to ‘sins of the flesh’. Rather, it means something like ‘life before baptism’ – for many of his readers, a life in paganism with a multiplicity of gods and possibly dissolute behaviour.

I commented on this last week when we looked at the distinction between those who Paul regarded as worldly and those who he regarded as ‘spiritual’:

Some people only think about their physical and material wellbeing. They live as if there is nothing beyond the physical life, as if there were no needs other than physical and material needs. A person who thinks there is nothing more important than the satisfaction of the sexual urge cannot understand the meaning of abstention, chastity, even faithfulness. A person who ranks the amassing of material things as the supreme end of life can’t understand generosity – giving things away. A person who is ruled by their appetites can’t understand purity and a person who has never thought beyond the world cannot understand the things of God. They look foolish. They don’t need to be like that but if they forever stifle the eternal longing in their soul, they may make themselves like that and God may be trying to speak to them, but they aren’t hearing.

I spoke about the psychologist Maslow and his hierarchy of needs and how he places the material and physical needs of human beings as the bottom layers – the essentials in life: are you fed watered sheltered have enough money to be secure. Only then may you consider the higher needs for meaning and value.

So, Paul says stop being worldly and be spiritual. Don’t just think about your physical and material needs but think about your spiritual needs and take the mind of Christ on matters.

The worldly life is to be contrasted with life in the Spirit, which begins at baptism. The Corinthians have been baptized but they are infants in Christ (v.1), merely human (v.4).

What are the signs of living according to the flesh? In Galatians 5.19-21, one of several lists of vices, Paul includes quarrels, dissension and factions. This was clearly the problem in Corinth where people were aligning themselves not just with Christ but with Paul, Apollos and Peter (see chapter 1). Paul refers to the ‘Paul’ and the ‘Apollos’ factions. Apollos was an impressive speaker, a Jewish convert who knew his Scriptures and could argue persuasively with non-believers. He had impressed the Corinthians more than Paul had. But they are missing the point. All are one in Christ. Paul uses the analogy of gardening (vv.6-9). They are a field – or garden – God’s field. Paul came to Corinth and planted it; Apollos came later and watered it; but growth is mysterious and comes from God. Paul and Apollos are no more than labourers who are to be paid, and the whole passage is a plea for unity in the church around Christ.

In Todmorden, just down the road from my home town of Burnley, although it’s over the border in West Yorkshire, there is a scheme called ‘[Incredible Edible](https://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk/)’. In public spaces vegetables are grown for people from the town to share and use. People are invited to help themselves. It requires trust, a mature attitude of working together as a community, restraint and the obvious input of planting and watering. Quarrelling, selfishness or greed have no place in a scheme like this. I’m sure there is – but they manage it. They should have no place in a Christian group aiming towards numerical growth and spiritual maturity.

Paul suggests that growth and spiritual maturity do not thrive where there is quarrelling and jealousy. Spiritual growth is a community thing as well as an individual journey. I would argue our natural human quarrels and jealousies give us the opportunity before God to reflect on our attitudes, our passions, our behaviours and find ways to grow spiritually in Christ through them.

In the film *Big* [PG], 12-year-old Josh Baskin is transformed into a 30-year-old man. It has advantages – he is brilliant at inventing new products for a toy manufacturer, but not yet mature enough to be happy as an adult. Paul suggests that some of the things required for a child to grow – nurturing, introduction of solid food (a messy process!) – are similar to those needed for spiritual growth.

What might help us in our spiritual growth? What have we learned from whatever helped us in the past? And can we use what we have learned to encourage and help others in their growth? Unless you are reflective, pause to reflect on what is happening to you and why – you wont grow. You will be destined to keep repeating the same mistakes. Psychologists say most people have the emotional age of a 12 year old. Can you learn from your experiences?

Know thyself? But unlike secular approaches to self-awareness Christian growth is about knowing thyself in Christ. We are being conformed to the likeness of Jesus – not to self-centred who we want to be – but maturity in Christ. That’s our standard, our direction.

Organizations aiming to reduce poverty often encourage schemes where a ‘starter pack’ is given so that people are enabled to take action themselves, for example, providing seeds and tools. Or ‘lend with care’ in which a loan from a donor is used, paid back and loaned again (e.g. [lendwithcare.com](https://lendwithcare.org/)). In some groups (e.g. [Alcoholics Anonymous](https://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/)), those who have been helped can support and encourage other people with similar problems. What actions can we take, as a church or individually, to ‘seed fund’ such a project? To mentor others, to get alongside each other and grow together?

Growth can be painful. Growth can be difficult: that’s why we talk of ‘growing pains’. Some people can be stunted in their growth. Some can be frozen in their maturity. The challenge of following Christ is to find the freedom of faith. Freedom from the hang ups, the prejudices, the negative beliefs and attitudes that can stifle our growth as spiritual Christians. May God give us a determination to grow, in Christ, and know the freedom of faith.

1. *Tim Lowe* [*https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/105-january-february-2020-a/epiphany-6/postscript*](https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/105-january-february-2020-a/epiphany-6/postscript) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)