**9th February 2020**

**1 Corinthians 2.1-16**

If you are a public speaker, there are always perils waiting to happen. I could fill a whole sermon on the clangers I have dropped in public speaking. Perhaps the best one was while leading a funeral of a woman who had died in her early sixties. She had been a keen line dancer – you know the kind of dancing where all the dancers are synchronised – all move to the right, then slap your thigh etc. But it all came out wrong in the funeral address, I said Kathy, as we all know, was a great lap dancer. She just loved it and loved to entertain those who were watching! There were audible gasps from the funeral congregation. And you think in your mind did I just say she was a lap dancer and not a line dancer? And you wonder whether you should apologize but then draw attention to it – or just hope that people weren’t listening or give you the benefit of the doubt?

As we continue our look at Paul’s First letter to the Corinthians chapter 2, he starts off by talking about his preaching.

*When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.[*[*a*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+2&version=NIV#fen-NIV-28396a)*]****2****For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.****3****I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling.****4****My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power,****5****so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.*

He comes in simplicity. Paul had just been in Athens and had tried to talk in terms of philosophy and eloquent speech but now it seems like he has said ‘never again’. I am just going to tell you the story of Jesus in simple terms. Forget the fancy words – I’ll just tell you straight.

Sometimes simplicity has a power that nothing else has. When you deal with ordinary people a vivid factual picture has a power that even a close-knit argument lacks. Often the way to a person’s inner most being lies not through their mind but through their heart. Christ crucified moves people emotionally.

I well remember as a six year old in my Sunday School class the emotional impact my Sunday School teacher Mrs Passovichwz, a polish refugee, had on me when she plainly described how Jesus died on a cross – flinging her arms out wide and having tears in her eyes. Wow I thought this was important.

Paul came to speak in weakness and great fear and trembling. I don’t think this was fear for his safety, nor was he ashamed of the gospel but it was a fear of serving the Lord faithfully – getting the message right. It’s a huge responsibility to share the message about God’s love – because you might misrepresent it – or compromise it.

Franklin Graham is getting banned from numerous UK venues for his preaching – which frankly for me doesn’t represent the good news of the Christian message. [[1]](#endnote-1)

They say really great performers always have a trembling anxiety before they speak - whereas those who have no fear, anxiety or nerves may give a competent and efficient performance that lacks conviction.

I remember in my second year at university in Freshers week being invited to tell the newcomers in our hall of residence about the Christian fellowship. A hall of 100 18-year-old boys. It was pretty daunting standing up and saying I’m a Christian - there’s a Christian fellowship in hall. But there was a blackboard in the room, and I started by scraping my fingernails down it. I said Bono from U2 (they were the biggest Rock Group in the world in the mid 80s), said mentioning Jesus Christ in conversation is like scraping your nails on a blackboard – people don’t want to hear. But some of us do meet to discuss and share what we understand about him. If you are interested – come and see me. Most thought I’ll avoid that bloke – but our fellowship group grew and we had said plainly what we were about.

Paul comes with results not just words alone. The result of Paul’s preaching is that things happen. There is a demonstration of the Spirit’s power. Presumably he means that lives are changed, answers to prayer are received, people move closer to God. Testimonies of lives changed are always more powerful than any words. That’s why I’m always keen for people to share what God has been doing in their lives it is always more powerful than anything a preacher can say.

There was a man who had been an alcoholic who had been captured by Christ. His workmates knew it and they tried to talk him out of it. They would say ‘surely a sensible person like you can’t believe in the miracles in the Bible, like Jesus turning water into wine. The man turned around and said, ‘whether he turned water into wine or not I don’t know; but in my house I have seen him turn beer into furniture.’

It is far harder to try and talk people into Christianity than actually show them Christ in our own lives.

In verses 6-9 Paul make a distinction between two types of Christian instruction. There was the *kerygma* – the announcement of good news – the blunt basic facts of Christianity. Obviously, this was the first stage. There was *Didache* – which means teaching - the explanation of the meaning of those facts. Which is what Paul is talking about here. So far, he has been talking about Jesus Christ crucified – that is the basic announcement. But he goes on to say we shouldn’t stop there. We need to find the meaning of those facts. Go on to maturity. The tragedy is that so often people are content to remain at the elementary stage when they should be going on to think things out for themselves.

In church life we try and offer opportunities to grow in our understanding of our faith and opportunities to express our faith. Carole is just starting a Stepwise course helping people go deeper in their faith and spiritual growth. House groups have started up allowing opportunity for mutual encouragement in our faith. Alpha Courses are an introduction to the Christian faith.

When Paul uses the word mystery in this passage – he uses it in a technical sense. The word is used to describe a rite or ceremony carried out in a society whose meaning is quite clear for the members of that society but lost on the outsider. So, what Paul is saying is ‘we go on to deal with things and to explain things which only the person who has already given their heart to Christ can understand’. But this special teaching is not for the intellectual. All knowledge is given by God, the result of the seeking spirit of a person meeting the revealing Spirit of God. The more we seek and strive to understand the more God can tell us.

The last section Paul says a couple of things. The only person who can tell us about God is God, through the work of the Spirit. Paul uses a human analogy: there are certain things which only a person can know – feelings so personal, private, experiences so intimate that on one knows them except a person in their own spirit. No one can really see into our hearts. But Paul argues that the same is true of God. There are deep and intimate things in God which only God’s Spirit knows, and the Spirit can reveal them to us.

Theologians talk about natural revelation – how people can look at the world and their experiences and intuitively believe there is a God – there must be a reason why there is something – why the universe makes sense, why there is life when the odds against it are astronomical. But only having natural revelation means people down the centuries have guessed at what God may be like. God could be loving – but what if you suffered – does that mean God is capricious – hates you – punishes you?

Is God sending us the Corona virus to teach us a lesson? No is the answer – because of special revelation we have of God in Jesus. Jesus came to heal people not to inflict illness and death on people. It would be inconsistent with the nature of God we see in Jesus to bring a plague on us.

The American President, Donald Trump delivered his State of the Union speech this week, the annual address given to Congress about the President's priorities for the next year. It was, as ever a highly divisive and partisan speech. In it he addressed religious freedom, abortion and the faith of a young woman who was murdered by Islamic State.

He said "We are joined this evening by Carl and Marsha Mueller. After graduating from college, their beautiful daughter Kayla became a humanitarian aid worker. She once wrote, 'Some people find God in church.  Some people find God in nature. Some people find God in love. I find God in suffering. I've known for some time what my life's work is, using my hands as tools to relieve suffering.'

I find God in suffering – it is quite a profound statement and testimony. Perhaps Paul likewise sees the love of God most expressed through Christ crucified. But that is part of God’s self-revelation.

That’s were special revelation comes in – where God reveals God self. This is what I am really like. The People of the Book: Jews, Christians and Muslims all believe that we can only really know what God is like if God chooses to reveal that information. Though of course those three religions disagree on the nature of the God they believe their special revelation reveals. The Jews stop at what we call the Old Testament, or the Tanakh. The law revealed to Moses, the writings of the deeds of God in history of the Jewish people and the writings of the prophets who believed they had a message from God. Christians believe in a Christ like God. The writings of the New testament testify to the work of Jesus, written by numerous authors. Paul and others wrote letters to the first churches instructing them in how-to live-in response to the revelation of Christ. Muslims believe that Mohammed got the supreme revelation in the Koran and that superseded and corrected the errors, in their view, of the New Testament. So being wonderfully diverse we have different revelations of God. You pay your money – you make your choice. I suggested last wee that there is good evidence to trust the Christian testimony about Jesus. We are discussing that this week at Alpha Course.

But even then, it is not that every person can understand these things. Paul speaks about interpreting spiritual things to spiritual people and those who are not spiritual people.

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.

If you know about Maslow and his hierarchy of needs, you will know that 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. Some would argue that before people can accept Jesus as the Bread of life, they need bread for their stomachs first before they can be open for bread for their soul.

We however must pray for the mind of Christ. If you have invited the Spirit of God into your life, the Spirit of Jesus, then as you look for wisdom the basic question will be the dialogue with God – what should I do? What would Jesus do? Not so much I will do what I want, its my life no one tells me what to do – but a genuine conversation with the Lord of the universe through the Spirit.

And the Spirit can guide us in many ways- -as the Alpha Course has a session looking at that: through the counsel of the saints, through commanding scripture, through compelling spirit what is our conscience, convictions saying,; through circumstantial signs; and course through common sense.

We must pray for the Spirit to help us – for only when Christ dwells within us are we safe from the encroaching demands of material things.

May our faith not rest on human wisdom but on God’s power.

Bibliography:

W Barclay: 1 Corinthians, St Andrew Press

1. <https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/all-eight-venues-cancel-on-christian-evangelist-franklin-graham?utm_source=Premier%20Christian%20Media&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=11273265_daily%20news%206%20Feb&utm_content=1&dm_i=16DQ,6PMI9,KCOFX7,QSG6H,1> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)