

So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those have been given a trust must prove faithful. 1 Cor 4.1-2.

So far in our study of 1 *Corinthians* we have seen how sad Paul was that the Christians in Corinth were so divided. Some were for Apollos, some for Peter, others for Paul. Paul has just argued that the reality is the very opposite of this: Paul, Apollos, and Peter are for *them*. They are their servants. But chap 4 introduces a new idea: it is not just that some of these Corinthian Christians are pro-Apollos, or pro-Peter, but that some are positively *anti*-Paul. 4.3a reveals that some are very critical of Paul indeed.. How Paul deals with those vehemently against him is for another sermon, but it is a master-class in how as a Christian one should love one's enemies. I've been 30 years in the ministry. Not everyone has been dying about me. In fact a few have even hated me. It's not easy to deal with, but Paul had it also, as we shall see later.

But what is important about ministers like me, preachers, apostles like Paul, is not who we are - our personalities and skills - but what we have to say. The Revd X may be a hugely amusing person, very charismatic personality, warm and witty, but what he preaches from the pulpit is drivel and unbiblical. The Revd Y may be a dull as ditchwater, but when he gets into the pulpit what he says is pure gold, because it is the full Christ-centred Bible message. That is what Paul means here in 4.1... Forget whether Apollos is a flashy speaker, or Peter is an exciting person. What counts is what God has entrusted to them to say, the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. Is your minister preaching Jesus Christ? Is he faithful to the message? Vv1-2... and v7...

It is precisely because the Corinthians are judging these

various preachers by worldly values that they have become divided. But we shouldn't judge anyone like this. What does our opinion amount to anyway? Even our opinion about ourselves is rarely right. Superthin women think they are fat. Genuinely clever people often think they are stupid, because they are smart enough to realise how little they know and understand. In my experience, the people who ought to feel guilty don't, and the ones who are wracked by guilt shouldn't be, vv3-4... The only One whose opinion we should be bothered about is God's, for he alone sees to the heart, vv4-5...

V5, 'judge nothing before the appointed time' ... In our TV/celebrity age we tend to praise to the skies those who are the flavour of the month, but they are soon forgotten. Time will tell what is right. We just sang that old favourite hymn, 'All things bright and beautiful', one of the most famous hymns in the world. It was written by Mrs Cecil Frances Alexander. She was the wife of the Abp of Armagh, Dr Wm Alexander. He died in 1911, and in his day he was probably the most important person in Ireland after the Viceroy, the Lord Lieutenant. Mrs Alexander would have been the little dutiful wife in the great man's shadow. But 100 years on, Abp Alexander is entirely forgotten, and it is now his wife who is world-famous. Right round the world everyone now sings, 'Once in royal David's city', 'All things bright and beautiful' and 'There is a green hill far away'. She was the Sunday School teacher in her husband's parish of Killeter very near my own parish of Pettigo. She only wrote these little songs to teach the children the catechism. 'Judge nothing before the appointed time.'

A hero of mine is a Cornishman called Rick Rescorla, who went to fight in the Vietnam War and retired from the US Army to be

chief security officer for Morgan Stanley in the World Trade Center. When Al-Qaeda first tried to bomb the building from the underground car-park, he became convinced that the terrorists would try again. He predicted that they would fly planes into the Twin Towers. Everyone laughed him to scorn as a madman. But ten years later he was proved to be absolutely right. What may not fit into today's fashionable thinking may one day be shewn to be the truth. 'Judge nothing before the time'. What you are trying to do at the moment as parents, teachers, employees, even preachers may seem futile. You may think you are banging your head against the wall. I sometimes wonder what I am doing as a Police and Army Chaplain, but who knows what seeds are being sowed. 'Judge nothing before the time.'

Why did our baby die? Why could Laura and I not be parents? Why do good people suffer and bad people have a great life? These questions baffle us all. Again, judge nothing before the time. 'Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face'. At the moment 'we walk by faith, not by sight'. Let's read again 4.5...

So, says Paul, let's avoid divisions in the church by bragging up our leaders for what they are as people and instead, listen to the message God has entrusted to them, v7... and vv1-2... 'Now it is required that those who have been given a trust should prove faithful'. This is the verse that truly makes me shudder. God has entrusted me with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Have I proved faithful? Looking back over 30 years I tremble at the mistakes I have made, the errors of judgement, the failure to practise what I preach. What, if anything, have I actually achieved for the Lord? Not one single person has ever been so inspired by me that they have

wanted to become a minister. What sort of example have I been? But don't we all ask this question. God has entrusted children to us as parents, teachers, youth leaders. Have we proved faithful?

Probably not, but here, I think, is the very heart of the gospel. God entrusts so much to us, and we prove so feeble, and yet he still trusts us. Amazing! I take heart from words of Paul in 2 Cor 4.7 on p1160 ... Would you really put treasure in cheap, breakable clay jars? But that is what God does with us.

Just look at the disciples Jesus called. What a shower! Peter denied Jesus. Judas betrayed him. When he wanted their support in the garden of Gethsemane, they just fell asleep. That was when he famously said, 'The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak'.

And look at the great St Paul himself. He might have been the mighty apostle of Christ throughout the Roman empire and the brilliant theologian, but he could never forget the reality that at one time he had viciously persecuted Christians and had consented to the death of an innocent man, St Stephen, the first martyr. How could the Lord Jesus have called someone like him? This truly was treasure in earthen vessels. And the lovely Bible word for it is Grace. All that God gives us is undeserved. Turn to p1191, to the moving words of Paul in 1 *Tim* 1.12-17...

'Grace' sums up everything Christianity stands for. In Islam, in Mormonism, you're either good enough or not good enough. In Christianity, God willingly and lovingly puts his trust in those who are not good enough. The writer of the famous hymn, 'Amazing grace', was John Newton, who for years made his money from the hateful and cruel slave trade. And yet Christ called even a moral wretch like him. Treasure in clay pots. Doesn't that give us all hope?