

I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way - in all your speaking and in all your knowledge. 1 Cor 1.4-5.

Last week I introduced you to the tiny group of about fifty Christians swamped by the huge population of 500,000 pagans in Corinth. If you think it's hard today to be a Christian in our consumerist, secular, amoral society, imagine what it was like for those brave Christians 2000 years ago.

But being vastly outnumbered and overwhelmed by the dominant pagan culture around them was not the worst of their problems. The real threat to their little Christian congregation came from *within*. The real value of our studying 1 Cor today is in seeing a congregation from the very early church warts and all. In thirty years of ministry I have come across some pretty serious problems in congregations. I was convener of a vacant congregation in Co Tyrone for two years, and it was split right down the middle. Two elders hated each other, and the rest of the church took sides. It was awful. Only when the men died did things start to clear up. It's true sometimes that in death there is hope! This congregation was famous throughout Ulster for its rowing, but it was as nothing compared to the Corinthian church. To begin with it was a deeply divided church. Here was a real personality cult. Some thought Paul the greatest thing since the sliced pan. Others followed Apollos, while others fell in behind Cephas (Aramaic for 'rock', ie Peter), vv10-12... This division is clearly serious, because Paul comes back to it in ch3. Vv3-7...

Cliquey churches are not healthy churches, and I pray that

St Paul's will never be a cliquy place where people feel they are excluded. But Corinth's problems were far more serious.

And it gets worse. Look at ch6; these Christians were so quarrelsome that they were taking each other to court! In ch7 we learn that they just didn't get this Christian marriage thing at all. *More quarrelsomeness.* But, if that were not bad enough, just go back to ch5: they're even into incest! And there's more of it in 6.12ff. They're off to prostitutes!

And at ch11 we learn that they haven't a clue about the real meaning of Holy Communion. They are so divided that those who think they are the top-dogs come first to communion to take the best seats and scoff all the food.

You remember that famous passage about love in ch13?

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all knowledge; and though I have I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing.

We read this at wedding services, but Paul wasn't praising love because he felt all sloppy and sentimental. He had to write to them about love, because it was clear from their attitudes and behaviour to each other that they had no love in their hearts.

The Corinthian church was a basket case. They just hadn't understood this Jesus thing, and their behaviour was shockingly awful. If *I* had been Paul writing to them, I would have been full of anger and disappointment. I would have addressed them as sinners. *And yet...* and yet this is not at all how Paul addressed them. V2, he addresses them as 'sanctified in Christ'. In v4 he tells them that he always thanks God for them. Why? 'because of God's grace given to them in Christ

Jesus'. Well, we have just seen that there wasn't much grace among them at all! In v5 he says that in Christ they have been enriched in every way... And just look at v7... 'You do not lack any spiritual gift'!

Why is he praising them up when they clearly are such rotten Christians, and he knows it? The clue is to be found in two innocent words which you have skated over a hundred times before: the two simple words 'in Christ'. Let's read again vv2-6... And it's all summed up in v9 where Paul tells us that we are called by God into fellowship with God ...

And here, with those two simple words, 'in Christ', we come to the heart of the gospel. This is the great thing God revealed to St Paul, and it is probably the strangest notion to understand. We are not called to be 'good'. We can't be perfect, because we are too weak, too sinful. The gravitational force of sin pulls us down every time from our good intentions. 'The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak', as Jesus himself said, and we can all say 'AMEN' to that. We are not called to be perfect, but to follow Christ, to be 'in Christ'.

What does that mean? You can literally be 'in Christ'. Imagine that you are filthy, covered in dirt, but you put on a pure white robe, covering every part of your body. Now imagine that you are standing before God the Judge on the Final Day in all your filthy sinfulness. He will most certainly condemn you, because to let you off might be kind, but would shew that *he* is not righteous. Would you think much of a judge who let off the paedophile who abused your child, or the drunk driver who killed your wife? But suppose you were literally to put on

Christ, like a pure white robe? Now God the Father would no longer be looking at you in your sinfulness, but at his own Son in all his purity and righteousness.

I can remember when this strange but beautiful gospel idea first made sense to me. Tears ran down my face that I no longer had any reason to fear the Judgement. Yes, I would stand before the awful Judge to give an account of myself, as we all have to, but I would not have to stand there in my sinful nakedness but clothed in Christ himself. God the Father would no longer be looking at me, but at his Son in all his purity. Christ would literally cover me, like a pure coat.

*When the last trumpet's voice shall sound,
O may I then in Him be found!
clothed in his righteousness alone,
faultless to stand before His throne.*

So, although Paul knows these Christians in Corinth are rotten, he does not address them as they actually are, but as they are 'in Christ'. God sees you as you are, and there's no fooling him. We all want the world to be a fair and just place. But you can't want them over there to be judged but not you. That wouldn't be fair, would it? God sees you for what you are, but if you are 'in Christ', he will see not you, but his Son, and acquit you on the Day of Judgement. So get into a right relationship with Christ, and God will see you through the eyes of Christ. You don't have to be perfect. You just have to repent and ask to be 'in Christ'. That is why this Christianity thing is not just more good advice, but good news. It's all grace, all undeserved, all about what Christ can do for you, not what you can do for Christ.

