

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, the weak things to shame the strong, the lowly and despised things...so that no-one may boast before him.

1 Corinthians 1.27-29.

Why is it that we clergy, on the whole, are such a bunch of wazzocks? I know that there are a few good ones, but most of us, I'm sorry to admit, wouldn't do very well if we had to get proper jobs. We talk the most appalling drivel from our pulpits. Our admin leaves a lot to be desired. We're a pretty weedy, wet, uninspiring lot. Why you come to church Sunday after Sunday to listen to us is a complete mystery to me. I've been at this for thirty years now, but I'm still dreading that day when you finally you see through me. It'll come!

But then I look at people in the pews, and I wonder if they are much better. After all, didn't we clergy originally come from the pews? It always moves me deeply to come across men and women, incredibly distinguished in their fields, humbly coming to church to worship God, but you have to admit, there are also some pretty weird people who go to church, aren't there? Why does the church attract such a disproportionate number of losers and inadequates? I often think that if only our churches were filled with the beautiful people, the successful and strong, all the other beautiful, successful and strong would want to join them. Like attracts like.

Amazingly, St Paul gives us an answer to this, and it is an answer which gets to the very heart of God. On p1145 we read this description of the Corinthian Christians, 1.26... Most, though not all, of these Christians were women, slaves, poor and uneducated, the sort of people despised in class-riven,

status obsessed Corinth. You can see why they would have been attracted to the church. They were nobodies in secular Roman society, but in the *Church* they were the sons and daughters of Almighty God. That's very powerful. The reason that Pentecostalism is growing so fast in Latin America today is that those marginalised by society, can in the *church* experience directly, without a priest, the power of God.

It would be easy at this point to assert from our passage in 1 Cor 1 that God loves only chavs, or that, in a sub-Marxist way, God has a 'bias towards the poor'. The poor and marginalised are no more virtuous than the so-called rich. We are all sinners before God. And let's stop this fashionable bashing of the middle classes. Most people in the so-called middle class got there, not by privilege, but by hard work.

We're not talking the triumph of the proletariat over the wicked bourgeoisie here, but God having a laugh. He's laughing at us and our ridiculous pretensions. And God *does* laugh at us. Turn to p543, to *Psalms* 2.1-4 where the world's rulers become all high and mighty against God. God just laughs at them ...

And he laughs at *us*. We swoon over beauty. We kill people for bright pieces of metal called gold and shiny bits of glass called diamonds. Why? It is ridiculous how we judge people on how much money they have, or how young and beautiful they look. We do all sorts of ridiculous things to our faces and bodies to look young. It fools no-one but we still do it! Like the Romans in 1stC Corinth, we live in a culture of success. There is huge pressure on us to be successful. We pressurise our children to succeed, but how do we define success? Being thinner than the

next woman? Oxbridge? Three foreign holidays a year rather than a weekend at Scarborough? We're busting a gut to get all these things, stressing ourselves out, and what does God do? He just laughs at it all. He doesn't buy into this value system at all.

So it isn't that he *prefers* the poor things of the world. Rather, he *chooses* them to mock us for setting so much store by the rich and powerful things of the world, 1 Cor 1.27-28...

And why does he do this? V29, 'so that no-one may *boast* before him?' What Paul is getting at here is not some Marxist notion that the poor are better than the rich, but self-sufficiency. Why have the churches been emptying so quickly, especially since the last war? It's not just because of the crisis of faith over the slaughter of the First World War, but because since 1945 people have never had it so good. From 1945 onwards education opened up to ordinary people. Everyone was covered by the new NHS. Medical advances were extraordinary. Heart by-passes and new hips are now two-a-penny. With antibiotics we do not have to fear infection. We all have cars now, centrally-heated houses. Despite the recession we are still richer and more comfortable than we've ever been. And that is where the problem lies. It's been onwards and upwards since the war. We've achieved so much. We feel strong, invulnerable, powerful. We're affluent, healthy, educated. So why do we need God any longer? We've outgrown that primitive and superstitious need. Man can do everything now. The churches should be stuffed full these days with people grateful for a lifestyle previous generations could only dream of. But instead our churches are empty. We don't need God any more. *We are God now.*

Human wisdom and might have made us arrogant and self-sufficient. We no longer feel a humble dependence on God, or solidarity with other people. The stronger we have become, the more God has been pushed out. But are we strong? In that memorable scene, the man who had all the worldly power, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, faced Jesus, a nobody to the world, a nobody about to be abused and finally executed. Now, 2000 years later, who is the one who conquered the world? It certainly wasn't Pilate. Who has heard of him today? But the whole world has heard of Jesus Christ. And for all our material and physical progress, our people are still inwardly hungry. Why do we have such an unstoppable drugs culture? We're empty.

When we're strong, we become cocky. We push God out of our lives, just as Adam and Eve did at the beginning. And having pushed God out of our lives, we have constructed a crazy culture with upside down values and priorities, which wouldn't matter if it were not for the countless people who suffer through our wars, injustice and spiritual wilderness. God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He came as a weak baby to a poor stable. He died as a common criminal on a Cross, a failure to the world. But this is how he conquered the world, 2.2-5... God chooses the poor and the weak, because they know they are poor and weak. They can only go up. In our materially rich and superficially 'clever' society, we need humbly to confess our need, our inward poverty and foolishness, if there is going to be any real progress in society. The reality is that we need God and we need each other. Modern man needs to be brought down a peg or two. Perhaps it's started.