

The Story of Corinth

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

** More on being Called **

I don't know what your opinion is of the apostle Paul...

Perhaps you feel he is the person who wrote the complicated letters at the back of the New Testament which are hard to understand, and full of long dense sentences

Perhaps you feel he is the great evangelist, whose missionary zeal is badly needed by the Church now

Perhaps you worry about what he is meant to have said about women, or how he seemed at times to perpetuate slavery

Perhaps you see him as the great apostle to the Gentiles, the one who realised that Church had to move to all nations to become the body of Christ

Perhaps you see him as the great teacher of the atonement, who truly understood how Christ died for our sins

Or perhaps you worry that he is the one who took the inclusive, radical religion of Jesus and turned it into something more serious, less forgiving, more about black and whites and living on the margins.

I think that what I have discovered is that the best of him is better than I had imagined, And that the parts that I jar with, have to be better understood, Or perhaps even he did not actually say.

I love Paul because he was the great Apostle of the Holy Spirit, who believed that the Good News of Jesus Christ was good news for every person and every place, who chased down the radical implications of this, and gave himself to speak and live this truth.

My old teacher John Barclay used to say,
You may love Paul
You may hate Paul
But please don't tame Paul.

I love Paul untamed, and that is what we are going to be thinking about over the three months, as we do a deep dive into 1 Corinthians -

The start of the letter

As we are going to discover in future weeks, the Church in Corinth had some crazy problems, problems beyond any Church problem which we have ever faced.

There is someone living with his father's wife
There are factions
There is boasting
And the Communion services are a catastrophe
People are taking each other to court
It seems that temple prostitution is an issue
And there is a dispute about exactly what to do in Corinth's temples
People are unsure about whether to get married, given that the end of the world might be coming soon.

But what is remarkable is that you would have no hint of that whatsoever from the first 9 verses of the letter...

In it Paul tells the Corinthians
That they are sanctified - they have been made holy
They are the ones called holy - which means that if you are called holy, then God is going to make that happen.

Holy means set apart, it means that you have about you the character of God.

And what is remarkable is that Paul says this trumps, and is not destroyed by all the things that we are going to talk about.

That is going to be a thing - all the things here, in the start, are not diminished or tarnished by all the things that we are going to talk about later on in this later.
There is not a sense of "if you carry on as you are, you are going to destroy the work of God"

We live with a sense that the goodness of God hangs by a thread
That the favour of God can be lost in an instant.
That the truth of God can be destroyed by the slightest slip, or is definitely destroyed by the biggest slip
Paul is saying, absolutely not.

In saying this, he is engaging in an illocutory speech act, which is fancy way of saying
That by saying he is making it more true
But only because the Corinthians themselves know deep within themselves that Paul is talking the truth.

So I want this Pauline, illocutory speech act, summon what your soul knows to be true about you
That God has you
That God is making you holy, has made you holy, will continue to make you holy
As you wait for Jesus Christ
Did you know that there is a part of you that waits for Jesus

It is a crazy thing here, that Paul says - as you wait for Jesus
That's a strange thing to say, because the Corinthians might say
Things I did today
- Fought with my neighbours
- Slaved
- Did things with a temple prostitute that I want no one to know about
- Was angry, greedy, not the best

And Paul says
- You were waiting for Jesus

Why is that?

Because Paul recognises that the deepest hunger, the hunger of the soul, is for the appearance of Jesus.

GK Chesterton once said that the young man who knocks on the door of the brothel
Is really looking for Jesus.

And what this speech act, does is that names what is already true, in a way that is true.
Summons a truth into being
A truth which we already know
Despite much evidence that seems to go the contrary
This is truer than the shrillest loudest voice which speaks against me.

And that is at the heart of this - the idea of call.

There are four calls in this section
Paul is Called Apostle by God
The Corinthians are called to be Holy
The whole Church calls upon God
And we are reminded at the end that he is who is faithful has called you

This is about the power of speech to make things real, to bring them to be,
To unveil what is already present

So let us go through this...

Introduction to letter

Now normally ancient letters did have a formal style

From Neil to the Church at Logierait
Greetings

And then you would get into it.

Paul

Paul expands this, because he wants to use this moment to bring to mind these truths.

The first thing he talks about himself...

Paul and apostle by of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

The word apostle, some commentators think is about a claim of authority - I have been put in position by God so you have to listen to what I say. That may be the case, but there is another line of thought that Paul sees apostleship as an act of offering your weakness to the world, it is an act of humility, which allows Jesus to shine through. That's one of the questions that we are going to ask as we go through the letter. And it makes us ask, what kind of witness do we live in our life. God has put me in Charge. Or I am little and broken and weak, so that God can be big, and bright, and strong though me... which is it?

Paul also mentions that he is here with Sosthenes. Now that is very interesting, because in ancient letters, no one ever ever mentions someone else that they are sending the letter from. Letter after letter after letter in the ancient world - one name as sender. Here Paul is saying two.

And if you notice through this part of the letter, there are a number of things that happen in partnership.

Along with Paul and Sosthenes

There is also mention of the Corinthians being joined to other Churches who call on the name of the Lord Jesus

"Our lord and theirs"

And of course lots of "God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"

There is a lot of partnership going on here.

Which is a very interesting subtle model to put before the the Corinthians where their model of discipleship seems to be everyone for themselves.

The Gospel right from the being of God, is never a solo sport, it's always a partnership.

So that's Paul
Humble apostle
In partnership.

Corinthians

Now what about the other key actors in this drama...

The Corinthians.

They are addressed by this dual identity

“The Church of God which is in Corinth”

Those “Called out by God in Corinth”

Do you notice that they are both called out
And still in.

Called out,
Still in.

They are both God’s Church
And the Church in Corinth
They have two names that can be applied to them
God
Corinth.

Leslie Newbiggin, the great mission leader of the 20th Century, who was ordained a Church of Scotland minister, but later became a bishop in the Church of South India, used to say that in the New Testament, the Church is only known by two names
Either the Church of Jesus Christ
Or the Church of a place

That’s your two identities,
Your local community
Your Lord

You have an identity bit from where you are called out
And a bit where you remain in.

Now let us think about Corinth.

Corinth was defined by a word that still exists in English, Isthmus, the narrow strip of land - 8 miles long across the south of Greece. Crossing this from East to West meant you didn’t have to go round the bottom of Greece, and there were two harbours with Corinth in the middle.

On top of good water, and good farmland, and the fact that they were the centre of a huge sporting event - the Isthmian games - meant that Corinth was up and coming and prosperous.

It has also been refounded by Julius Caesar in 44BC with a big Roman influence.

There are many many temples, and people seem particularly obsessed with bodies, there are many many statutes of body parts in Corinth - interesting that one of the dominant metaphors in the letter will be the body.

If Edinburgh is the Athens of the north
Corinth was more like Glasgow

It was dominated by the making of wealth, the getting ahead, the idea of status, and in particular the anxiety associated with people who are at the top but worry they have only recently arrived - a big issue in Greek literature - and also the internalised worthlessness of people at the bottom.

This is something that has dominated Glasgow - every since the tobacco barons, the Glasgow effect, the psychological anxiety of living in a community of deep inequality, where grasping wealth by whatever means you can get it, affects every part of the community for decade after decade, generation after generation.

So when people are obsessed about getting wealth,
What does it meant to hear
“In every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind”

And to one who is poorest
What does it mean to hear
“In every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind”

Do you see that what Corinth has pushed its identity onto the People
And that parts of that is good, they remain in the community
And parts of that are deeply toxic, - this status anxiety, this constructivist approach
Have pushed themselves onto the people, and this new identity of Paul is unravelling them.

*** Quote from Thiselton about the relevance of 1 Corinthians **
“There is no more relevant book to the world we live in today”

You are called to reflect a different identity, a new identity in Christ,
And God is faithful,
He will bring this to completion.

What God does

What is remarkable here is the way in which Paul is prepared to say that God is at work

God who is Father and Jesus, and this is going to be remarkable.
This is God’s work.

God is the one who does the thing in Corinthians and what he does is summon out from them a new identity.

Paul is an apostle by the will of God (verse 1)
The Church is the Church of God (verse 2)
They are made holy in Christ Jesus (verse 2)
They call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (verse 2)
Our Lord and theirs (verse 2)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Verse 4,
I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in every way.

You are not lacking in any gift
God is faithful
You were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

God and Jesus
God and Jesus
Calling you
Gifting you
Promising to appear to you
Fellowship with you

And this is a community which despite the appearances God is at work.

You need a bigger, more expansive, more active God to believe in this
Otherwise these become empty words
What is it consider that God is truly here,
And that these apply to us.

I want to look at two words here to close...

“Grace and Peace”

You see ancient letter always said a word “Chwrein” which means “Greetings”
And Paul changes that to “Chris” - Grace.

Grace means goodness, gift, which superabundant, not expecting a reward, bringing about a
change, not dependent on a previous gift and the dimension that Paul would come back to again
and again - utterly unmatched to the worth of the recipient,

In the ancient world you only ever gave gifts to those who deserved it
Who were worthy
Not to do that was shameful

God gives of his very self to those who are far off
And you have to grasp the scandal of this
The shock of this
The counter cultural obscenity of this
Grace is promiscuous and incongruous
It is a gift beyond all sense.

And Peace is the sense that all is well, but is totally relational
It is Irene in Greek
It is Shalom in Hebrew
In fact the addition of Peace commentators have long thought - back to ancient times is a
deliberate reference to the Jewish history of the faith
Shalom - it is a place of peace.

I have recently been re-reading Lord of the Rings, and there is a constant sense in Tolkien of a
yearning for a place where all is well, places where there is buttermilk, and XXX and XXX

Place where all is well.

And this is the gift of God to you.

And Paul is saying this all the time
Before we talk about anything else

“Grace and Peace”

To the Romans
Verse 7

“To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints, Grace to you and peace from God our
Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”

2 Corinthians

“To the Church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia,
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”

To the Galatians

“To the Churches of Galatia
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”

Ephesians

“To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”

Philippians

“To the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”

Colossians

“To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae
Grace to you and peace from God our Father... In our prayers... Jesus Christ”

I want us to remember wherever we are
Grace to you and peace
From God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Grace to you and peace
From God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Grace and peace

In all places
At the beginning of everything
Even in circumstances which wildly differ from normal situations, or where we want to be
Or feel graceless and placeless
I want us to remember this

Grace and Peace

Grace and Peace
Grace to you and peace
From God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

AMEN