

Fools and Parents

1 Corinthians 4:8-16

There are two images that run through this section of 1 Corinthians...

Two images that Paul uses for himself... see if you can hear them.

8 Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign—and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you! 9 For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. 10 We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! 11 To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. 12 We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; 13 when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.

Paul's Appeal and Warning

14 I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children. 15 Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. 16 Therefore I urge you to imitate me.

There seems to be a few things to notice in here...

The context seems to be that in Corinth, the disciples have slipped into what is sometimes called "an overly realised eschatology". What does that long and obscure phrase. It means that they have overlay claimed that what they are experiencing now is the resurrection already, and they are lording it about, in a state of delirium, so happy to have been resurrected.

This seems kind of odd when you consider that many of the Corinthians were still slaves. But they seem to have pulled off this high energy mind trick where they convince themselves that absolutely everything is marvellous, that paradise has come early, and that they are part of it...

At the same time as having massive fallouts over which apostle they love the most.

So there is all kinds of reality - in the lives of these Christians, and in the way that they are conducting themselves, which serve to go against this claim that everything in life is sorted, that the resurrection has come early.

And yet still they persist in this phenomenon.

And initially Paul seems upset that the Corinthians have fallen out, because to do so means that they have not understood the gospel.

But by chapter four, Paul is still writing, and now I think there is a deeper sense of hurt from Paul that they have rejected him - which demonstrates that it is worth staying with our sense of annoyance for a few chapters, until we discover that in amongst our annoyance at people on an objective level - I am fine, it's just that they haven't understood the gospel - is actually something which deeply hurts us - that we feel rejected...

"For though you may have 10,000 guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed in Christ, I have become your Father through the gospel" (verse 15)

But lets go back to the context, because Paul is upset at rejection, upset that the Corinthians has so profoundly misunderstood the gospel, and are wondering around in a state of self-delusion, the resurrection has already happened, heaven has come on earth, I can't stand the sight of you, you follow the wrong apostle.

And in Ephesus Paul is thinking - I can't believe it, do they not remember the Gospel of Jesus Christ, they don't understand that this whole gospel work is a *joint* exercise between me and Apollos, and do you know what, yes, actually, now I am come to think of it, I am feeling a bit rejected, and I am feeling a bit hacked off that life is more than tough for me, and they are lording it about, and now come to think of it, the hacked-off-ness I feel is actually also a place where I meet Christ.

So what rhetorical method, which gracious, godly method of communication does Paul use to convey this conflicted, complex truth about the whole situation - sarcasm!

Yes - it is not the lowest form of wit, it is not beneath us, sometimes when there is a complex range of principle and disconnect, perhaps sarcasm is the best form of speech that we can come up with.

For some of us, this will be a great relief, for some this will be a total shock, for some this will be terrible news because we can't stand sarcasm and sarcastic people - but there it is, Paul uses sarcasm.

"Already you have all that you want! Already you have become rich! You have reigned with kings without us!"

What Paul is trying to get at hear is a disconnect between rhetoric and reality
Between religious language and true experience
Between the life of the Corinthians and his life.

Now let us look at this reality for Christ, where he calls himself a fool for Christ, this is named reality...

For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. 10 We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! 11 To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. 12 We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; 13 when

we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.

How would you describe Paul here?

Utterly fed up... in a narrative where everything has gone wrong,

- if he went to CBT he would be told not to engage in black and white thinking
- Or catastrophising
- Paul is not saying here what he is meant to say, he is saying what he wants to say.

And I wonder if you have ever wondered about that as a place to be, where everything has gone wrong - I am particularly struck by the phrase ' We are the scum of the earth''

And remember that Paul there is a direct link between this experience and the cross of Christ, This is not a non-Christian rant, this too is profound theological reflection.

And then the call to see him as Father,

Do you recognise that sense of rejection... that sense of being turned back by your own children.

But still Paul believes in the power of his life,

Be imitators of me...

I remembered this week of something that we were told when we were training to be ministers.

It was a story told by a minister I knew, who succeeded my Grandfather to his Parish in the borders. He was the most established of establishment ministers in the Church of Scotland, he had been moderator, he was the person that when he spoke at the General Assembly, everyone listened; he had been a barrister in London before becoming a minister and spoke with a clipped, educated, well bred accent.

Everything about this minister said success, smooth, achievement,
And this was not an image that he seemed overly anxious to dispel.

He was speaking at a conference for ministers, and he was telling us about attachment to members of the congregation, and the hurts of parish ministry.

And he told us the story of a time that in his congregation in this country town, the young boy of two of his Sunday School teachers, two of the people who were at the heart of the Church and the community, was killed in a car accident. This had been a horrific accident, the community had been shocked, compounded by the age of this boy, the way that it had happened, the way that this loss seemed to fly in the face of the love and respectability and piety of his parents.

This man became involved as the minister, the friend, the one who was going to lead this terrible funeral, when the undertaker contacted him with a problem. Because this boy was so well known, and because the circumstances of his dying were so upsetting, he couldn't get anyone to help with the preparation of the body, and this was not a job that the undertaker could do alone. I am really stuck said the undertaker, and so the minister said "I'll do it"

And I was struck by the contrast between minister, the smooth lawyer, and him doing this terrible, upsetting task of preparing a young boy for his burial.

But that was not the point of the story... the point of the story that John was telling was something that happened two years after this.

"I can still remember the exact moment two years later, when at the door at the end of the service, the boys parents stood opposite me and told me they were leaving the Church"

That was the pain that struck him, almost like the pain of the loss of the boy.
And that is what Paul sees here,
The pain of the loss of those he regards as his children..
But still he urges them,
Be imitators of me
Be scum of the earth
Be dishonoured
Be weak
Be as those counted to die.

But also,
Somehow through me, the life of Christ will flow through to you

And notice that here, all the time, Paul is relating all of this experience to Christ
For him Christ is the ever present reality in all experience...

Verse 10 - "we are fools for the sake of Christ"

Verse 10 again " but you are wise in Christ" - this time I think Paul is saying this claim is inauthentic, religious language misused, whereas for him, it is a truth hard won

Verse 15 "You might have 10,000 Guardians in Christ, you do not have many Fathers, indeed in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel"

This is the key for Paul, every single moment, experience, thought, direction, he is claiming as part of the story of Christ, even in the most extreme broken places, still he is in Christ.

It is as if when John Cairns had prepared that boys body he still said
We are still in Christ
When we are living, we are in the Lord
When we are dying, we are in the Lord

Or when that couple had said to him, "we are leaving the Church"
He had still said
"The eye cannot say to the hand 'I have no need of you'"

Steve Taylor and Images of Leadership

Now I want to explore this chapter - chapter 4 and chapter 3 before it, using a theme that Steve Taylor, a missiologist from New Zealand has picked up on.

He notes that in these chapters, Paul uses 6 different images for leadership...

And this is very intriguing because it points us towards a biblical model of leadership
And since I believe that we are all leaders in different contexts
Then this points to us as images of who we might become...

Servant (3:5) - For Taylor the servant is the one who listens

Gardener (3:6-9) — what does a gardener do - they plant variety

Builder (3:10-17) - they get people together to do the building, they work together, collaboration

Steward (4:1-7) — they are aware of the resource they are given, and manage them

Fool (4:10) - They see what no one else sees, they become what no one else is brave enough to become

Parent (4:15) - the one who gives of themselves to others

Now what is interesting here, is that though these images are present in the chapter, and though Steve Taylor writes about them in a very compelling way, and you think, "yes, I love these images, let me be the fool, let me pay attention to the stewarding I am given - which for Taylor meant some budgeting decisions that had to be made"

Something about this is very interesting....

BUT

Taylor uses the images completely differently from the way that Paul uses them...

Servant - the one who labours and works hard where Christ has sent them - which is a bit different from Taylor's example of taking all his staff out for coffee and asking them that if they were a bath, what pours water in and what drains water out.

Gardener - which for Taylor is about variety, and there is a lot of diversity in Corinthians in the later Chapters, so its not a bad idea, but for Paul the idea is that you labour and you do the thing, but it is God who gives the growth, you are part of a process where God gives the light.

Builder - for Taylor is about collaboration, and Paul again is all about collaboration, but in the image he uses, the collaboration isn't about parallel working, but serial working, about one builder handing over to another, and what is really going on is don't build with shoddy material and in a shoddy way, make sure you build to last, with good quality work

Steward - which for Taylor is about shepherding resources, and I am all for that, but what Paul says is that he is a Steward of the mysteries of God's mysteries - and this seems to me to find every metaphor, every angle, every way of perceiving the truth that God is in Christ reconciling the world to himself, through the cross, to present a new community to him. That is the mystery, and the steward's job is to take that mystery into every corner and moment of existence, and share it with others.

Fool - the idea of the fool in Taylor is to be fun, and quirky - with Paul, it is the one who experiences deep shame and thought to be nothing, the mud on the shoe of humanity, to choose a path that no one would ever want to emulate

Parent - for Paul this is the one who births new people in Christ, who seems new people coming to faith, and maintains that connection, even if they end up having many guardians.

And I set the two beside each other, and one looks fun, and one looks real.

And it is the real one that you get to say "in Christ, in Christ, in Christ"

In the world of mission, and missiology, there is often a lot of talk about the early Church in Acts, the Church of Acts 2 and Acts 4.... And I want to be very careful about what I say here, because that Church is truly inspiring, and truly moved by the Spirit,

BUT

In Acts, and in the history of the Church, that is not the Church which lasts. By the end of Acts the Jerusalem Church seems to have retreated into a more sectarian view of Christianity, and profoundly struggles with Paul's Gentile Churches.

And that Church will be gone.
It will be Paul's Churches which last.

No one would ever say of the Church in Corinth - "they're hearts were continually glad, sharing all their food, devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching"

But that is the Church that sustains,

Because it manages to say, in the example of Paul

And even despite all their follies

And through learning through sarcasm

To say

In every moment

"In Christ, in Christ, you are in Christ, I am in Christ, in Christ all things are ours,

Christ died, Christ rose,

I am in Christ

In Christ

In Christ"

AMEN

