

## Paul, the letter writer

John 1:29-40, 1 Corinthians 1:1-10

19<sup>th</sup> January 2020

Let me begin with a quotation:

*“First - Talking about love – that’s a good thing, that’s about the best thing that can happen to anyone. Don’t let anyone make it small or light to you.*

*Second — There are several kinds of love. One is a selfish, mean, grasping, egotistical thing which uses love for self-importance. This is the ugly and crippling kind. The other is an outpouring of everything good in you — of kindness and consideration and respect — not only the social respect of manners but the greater respect which is recognition of another person as unique and valuable. The first kind can make you sick and small and weak but the second can release in you strength, and courage and goodness and even wisdom you didn’t know you had.”*

You would be forgiven to think that this excerpt is a quotation from a sermon. Especially, if we add the comment of the person, who quoted it: ‘These words of wisdom—tender, optimistic, timeless... — should be etched onto the heart and mind of every living, breathing human being’. Well, the words were not part of a sermon, they were, in fact, part of a personal letter, written by John Steinbeck, the famous American author, who wrote it to his teenage son in 1958, when the boy confided in him about falling in love for the first time.

In a sense, this is how we usually approach the letters of the Apostle Paul in the Bible. Because of their highly passionate and deeply theological tone we are tempted to take them as timeless sermons or even religious tenets valid for any situation. Yet, according to scholarly students of the NT, Paul would have been horrified at the thought that his letters composed in response to a particular group of people, with a particular current problem in mind, should be taken for all time as *the* final word in the matter of following Christ.

True enough, he was driven by his overwhelming belief in his own calling as an Apostle of Christ, who, by right, could speak with great authority, yet he was also convinced that God’s call was

shared by all the followers of Christ. For all his mighty visions about, what he called – ‘life in Christ’ - he was also a realist with great pastoral gifts, who lived in the present, and reacted to the day-to-day events of his time and affirmed that the Spirit of Christ took precedence over the letter of the Law (presumably, including any ‘laws’ of Paul, himself!)

So, what of his first letter to the Corinthians, which is given to us by the Lectionary for today and which is the recommended Epistle reading for the Sundays all through the season of Epiphany? Thinking of letters, I wonder, if you – like me- have kept some letters from the past? Letters of special importance, letters that have perhaps survived their sender and for that very reason have become even more precious? This is how Paul’s letters survived, because they were so meaningful for their recipients that they kept them and preserved them for future generations.

This may happen to our own treasured letters too. They may gain even more significance in the future, because the art of letter-writing is a dying art, and we have nearly reached the stage when we have to explain to our younger people what a proper letter is like. The different ways of modern communication have all but made letter writing, in the traditional sense, redundant. Yet, once upon a time it had a crucial role, enabling people to unite over great distances of time and place. Letters often carried such thoughts and feelings, which could not be expressed in any other way. Jane Austen, the 18<sup>th</sup> c novelist recognised this and gave prominent role to letters in her novels, which often changed the whole course of events within the story. We can think of Mr Darcy’s letter to Elizebeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, or Captain Wentworth’s letter to Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*.

As a literary form, letter-writing had time-honoured rules and customs, which the writers tended to observe, and this is what the Apostle Paul is doing at the start of his first letter to the Corinthians, a church, which he founded. He introduces himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus. Recently, I have come across a computer expert, who introduces himself by saying: ‘If your machine is repairable, I am the one, who can do it’, which makes me raise the question, how would we introduce ourself with one phrase that would catch the essence of our self-understanding? ‘I am the one, who asks questions’, ‘I am the one, who wants to help’, ‘I can clearly see the problems’, ‘I make people laugh’, ‘I am usually right’, ‘I like to make peace’, ‘I am an

encourager', I am... You can fill in the gaps for yourselves. Would our introduction be a self-referencing one, like that of the IT man, or would it reveal something about our relationship with God, as Paul's did?

Then Paul addresses his audience, members of the Corinthian Church. It would have been customary after the self introduction to say something nice about the recipient of a letter. Well, Paul, more than satisfies this requirement. As the epistle progresses it becomes clear that all is not well in Corinth, and Paul will have some critical things to say to the people later on, yet his initial words express nothing but praise and appreciation and thanksgiving for his congregation.

He mentions their grace-filled existence, the way they have been enriched by the knowledge of Christ; how the good news has been realised and confirmed in their everyday lives, and how they have been enabled to pass the message on. He then concludes with the final flourish: 'There is indeed no single gift you lack'. Praise indeed! The Corinthians must have felt pretty good and uplifted by reading this introduction. It may have softened their hearts and ready to hear the constructive criticism, which was to follow.

We, of course, know how critical and impatient we can be with each other's shortcomings. Well, the truth has to be told - we may say in our defence. But when it comes to acknowledging each other's good points, praising others for their achievements, somehow we are not always as forthcoming as we might be. And yet, how important a praising word can be! It builds people up and that is something we all need. We all have times of insecurity or self-doubt, which can paralyse us and stop us from engaging in bold, positive actions. A well-timed encouragement and word of praise can be crucial to nudge us forward.

If all this is true in our personal relationships, it is probably as valid in our church relationships too. As we have mentioned earlier we are in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This is an annual event when, apart from praying for unity, we are also trying to show in some symbolic way that as Christians we do belong together in spite of our denominational divisions. Here, we do it by attending united services with our Methodist and C of E friends. But, because it's a recurring event, it is easy to lose the enthusiasm for it. It is easy to forget Paul's observation that for 'all who invoke the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, wherever they may be', that same Jesus Christ is

'their Lord as well as ours'. Remembering this might help us to acknowledge and rejoice in the praiseworthy aspects of our Christian brothers and sisters, who choose to worship in different ways to ours, rather than focus on and criticise them for those differences. It might help us to give thanks for their companionship on the journey of faith, for their gifts of witness, for their acts of caring and healing within our shared local community.

I know we can not claim to be even near the Apostle's high aspirations when he urges the Christians of Corinth to 'avoid divisions' and have 'complete unity of mind and thought'. We know just how difficult it can be even within families to come to a common mind about anything, let alone in the larger community of a local church. (We will soon have the opportunity to prove it otherwise at our church meeting, which follows this service!) So, it's not surprising that 'the complete unity of mind and thought' amongst all Christians still eludes us. But Paul puts the matter in a larger perspective for the Corinthians: all their gifts, all their frailties and weaknesses are to be seen within the timescale of 'awaiting the Lord Jesus Christ to reveal himself'. Now, this can be understood in terms of the 'second coming' of Christ at the end of times, but it could also be taken as the everyday experience of Christ's followers, that, - through their discipleship, through their living a more and more Christ-like life - Christ is being revealed to the world in the here and now.

This is a very important perspective to get hold of. It means that this is a process and hopefully a progress. That we do not have to cling to what we have liked or disliked yesterday, because today, we can make a fresh choice. Yes, Christmas is over, but the revelation of Christ is not over. There are more things to be revealed today, next week, even next Sunday and we can be part of it if we hear God's call and rely on the Spirit of Christ, who will strengthen us. **Amen**

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