

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> September 17

1 Corinthians 1. v26 -2 v 10 – growing a spirit filled church

8:30 + 10:30

Good morning,

Great to be with you this morning as we continue our series on Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Last week Richard kicked us off and set the foundation for what is going to be a brilliant series. Today we pick up where Richard left off, beginning with the end of chapter one and continuing into chapter two, a chunk of text that explores the values of God's kingdom, values that are so different to the values of this world, values that turn the human order of things on their head.

But before we dive in, let's pray.

I want to begin this morning with a story – perhaps one you may recognise.

Once upon a time there was an Emperor who loved clothes! He loved clothes more than anything else! Every year on his birthday he was presented with lots of new clothes. And

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every year for Christmas he was presented with even more new clothes. In fact all the Emperor ever wanted... was lots of new clothes!

One day, two strangers arrived at the Emperor's palace. "We can make you the most beautiful clothes in all the world and everyone will want clothes like yours" they said, bowing low to the Emperor. "Ah, this is what I've always wished for" thought the Emperor. "To wear the most beautiful clothes in all the world.

For weeks and weeks the strangers worked on the clothes and wouldn't let anybody see what they were doing. But the Emperor grew impatient; he wanted to see the new clothes now! So one day he demanded to see them! When the strangers showed them to him the Emperor looked all around the room. He looked high... and he looked low. But he couldn't see the new clothes anywhere! "Where are the new clothes I have paid you to make," demanded the Emperor! "But they are right here, Your Majesty," said the first stranger. "What do you think? Aren't they made of the most delightful

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material, the most sparkling colours, the most fashionable design?”

The Emperor looked around confused; he couldn't see anything! “I can't see any clothes at all,” the Emperor said. “These clothes are so special and rare that only the cleverest people can see them the strangers said. They are too fine to be seen by stupid and ignorant people “Oh of course, of course” said the Emperor quickly (not wanting to appear stupid or ignorant). “They are beautiful; this is just what I've always wanted! I'm sure my new clothes will be greatly admired by all of my people.

I'm sure you know how the end of this story goes – the Emperor is humiliated as he parades in front of all his people, without any clothes on, and needless to say it is embarrassing for all his advisors who had all gone along with the story because they were too afraid to admit that they couldn't see the clothes. The Emperor is completely caught up with status, he has the power and the money to demand what he likes, and surrounded himself with people who would only say yes,

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and only encouraged this behaviour, eventually to his downfall.

Now this story was written many years ago, but I think the issue of status, especially celebrity status is still so relevant to us today.

The cult of celebrity is everywhere in our society, on TV, Film, music on Youtube. In the supermarkets, there are whole racks of magazines dedicated to examining the minutiae of the lives of celebrities, have they lost weight, have they gained weight, who has married who, who had divorced who – a cycle of meaningless information, that for some reason we are led to believe matters.

Society tells us that it is better to be ‘somebody’ than to be famous, to achieve A list status is to succeed in life, and that way of thinking has driven the cult of celebrity to ridiculous proportions, to the extent where people are famous for just being famous.

Now Corinth as a Roman city, was exactly the sort of place that people would look up to somebodies, it was a place, a society obsessed with status, only back then it couldn't be

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measured in like's, tweets or subscribers, it was measured in honour, the more honour you had, the higher up you were in society, all the way up to the Emperor who demanded honour from every person in the form of the imperial cult.

As we have seen already in the opening of this letter, as well as status and honour, Corinth also paid special attention to people who could speak well. The art of spoken word, or rhetoric, in Greek cities especially was highly valued and it was custom, at that time, that great teachers of the age like Aristotle and Plato would give public lectures, often walking up and down the covered walkways or portico's that were so popular in Greek cities. I like to think of them being a bit like an early version of the TED talks that we are familiar with today. To speak eloquently in Corinth, was also a sure-fire way of gaining status, and perhaps even followers, and it was into this situation, this culture that Paul arrived and the Corinthian church had begun.

We see from Paul's letter, that the Corinthian church had allowed the teaching of Paul to go to their heads – with their new found spiritual knowledge they considered themselves

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to have reached the peak of all wisdom and therefore they were better than anyone else around them, in other words, they felt they had achieved the status and honour that they had so longed for in society – but had fundamentally misunderstood that Paul's teaching did not concern the structures of their world.

And so Paul has to take them down a peg or two, he has to remind them that when he arrived in Corinth and announced the Gospel, most of them weren't among the wise, whom society looked up to. Most of them had no social power, and most of them did not come from noble families, so in Corinthian eyes, they were truly nobodies.

And Paul underlines this with his reproach in v 26-28 – because they can't see that it's precisely because of their status as 'nobodies' that God has come to them, God doesn't use the wise or the strong, or those with status, God chooses the foolish things to shame the wise, the weak things to shame the strong – and so to aspire to be anything but nobodies in human eyes, is foolishness to God, but also misses a more fundamental point – that God has made them

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‘somebodies’ – not the sort that society would recognise, but the sort that mattered.

For me, Paul’s teaching here is a reminder of the radically inclusive nature of God’s kingdom, it is a kingdom that holds precious the people that our world does not value, the people that our world has sought at times to exclude or even to eradicate. It is a reminder that the doors of this and every church must be open to all, regardless of age, race, gender, sexuality, ability or disability - because in the Kingdom of God we exclude others at our peril, we run the risk of becoming the strong and the wise ourselves - to our shame before God.

The value that God has for all of us, is demonstrated in the sacrifice of Christ – through his death and resurrection, we are elevated, we are made somebodies, just like the Corinthians. And like the Corinthians, we have nothing to boast of, because like them, what we received was the free gift of God – and if someone gives you a gift you don’t deserve, you haven’t got anything to boast about – in fact no Christian can boast of the status they now possess, because, from first to last, it is God’s work and gift that we receive.

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From Paul's own hand, and in descriptions in Acts, we know that he was not a powerful orator or a picture of strength, perhaps he was far from the powerful orators that the Corinthian church were used to – but Paul reminds them of that in the beginning of chapter 2, he writes *“when I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom, I came to you in weakness, with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the spirit's power.”*

It is clear that Paul did not come to boast, his teaching was not to glorify himself or to seek status, it was to testify to the Corinthian church that they are 'in Christ.' – What does Paul mean by that? That when we are in Christ – what is true of Christ is also true of us – that we are made a member of the Messiah's family, and endowed with the same wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption as Christ – and make no mistake, this is the ultimate status, one that goes way beyond anything that can be achieved here on earth, way beyond our human ideas of status, of wealth or power –

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and if that doesn't make you and me 'somebody' – then nothing ever will.

I think Paul's teaching here inevitably raises questions for us, about how we view our own status. Do we desire to be 'somebody' in the eyes of those around us? Do we want to be recognised for our status, our power, our wealth? Or can we be content to accept that we have the ultimate status in Christ? In one way or another, all of us at some point in our Christian journey will have to make this decision, it is up to us - will we boast about our own achievements, or will we boast in the Lord?

And I think these questions lead nicely into what I hope we can take away from this morning, which I think can be summarised under these three headings:

Called to be humble

Called to be radical

Called to be a follower of Christ

Called to be humble

As I said at the start of this talk, God's values are so different to the values of this world, he does things differently from

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humans, he uses the people the world considers weak or unimportant to reveal his greatness.

God chose to reveal his plan for us, in a way that we could never have expected, because it was so unlike our human nature – the saviour of the world was born in the back of beyond, it was an utterly humble beginning, and it is a reminder for all of us that the call to follow Christ, is the call to be humble, to turn away from the things that our world values and desires, and instead to submit to God and allow ourselves to be used to reveal God's glory here on earth. I say this and I know this is a costly path to walk, it demands much of us, but it is ultimately the path to recognising who we truly are in Christ.

Called to be radical

Every human being, man, woman, child bears the image and likeness of God, and neither has any more or less dignity, we are all equal in the eyes of God – and that is the radical and inclusive nature of God's kingdom. How do our values reflect the kingdom values? Do we treat all who we meet as equals?

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I believe that as followers of Christ, we are called to demonstrate the radical nature of the kingdom here on earth, to welcome and include all those who we encounter, whoever they are and to extend the love of God in any way that we can. Paul knew the danger of a church divided, both Corinth and Rome had issues that threatened their existence, and he knew that the only way that they can be truly be united, is through love for one another – and this love is to be our calling card, our defining characteristic – as Jesus said “by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Finally – Called to be a follower of Christ.

There are many ways to be a follower of someone, especially these days on social media, it is possible to follow every move of someone, to subscribe to them, to see everything they choose to share on snapchat or Instagram, it is easy to be a follower – but are we careful about discerning who is good to follow and who is not? Are they good role models for us, for the younger generation?

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As Christians we are called to follow only one person, and that is Jesus Christ, that is who I follow, who I subscribe too, and it is who we are all humbly, radically, faithfully called to serve.

Amen.