



Sermon preached by Revd Professor David Thompson on 8th February 2026

Readings: Isaiah 58: 1-9a; 1 Corinthians 2:1-12; Matthew 5: 13-20

The Second Sunday before Lent

But, as it is written,
'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him' -
these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit (*1 Cor. 2:8-9a*).

Paul's First Letter to the Church at Corinth may be one of the most often read of the New Testament Letters, and by chance it is the subject of this year's Lent Bible Studies which Chris Baker will be leading, beginning later this month in person and online. (See *Place Matters* or Penny for further details.). Rather than offer a second commentary on the Sermon on the Mount this week, I have chosen to try to answer two questions: what was going on in Corinth? why does it matter today?

It is uncertain whether Paul founded the church at Corinth or not. Acts 18 describes his visit to Corinth, but makes no mention of a second; it is written as though the church (or churches) already existed before he came. Corinth itself, a wealthy port at the southern end of Peloponnesian peninsula, was destroyed by an invading Roman general at the end of the second century BC, but was rebuilt by Julius Caesar around 44 BC. The first settlers of the rebuilt city came from various countries in the Eastern Mediterranean, including a substantial population of Jewish merchants who built a significant synagogue. It stood at a strategic crossroads between the route from Asia minor to Italy and the West and that between southern and northern Greece with access to Europe beyond. This was the source of its substantial wealth.

Corinth was therefore a very diverse city with diversities of ethnicity and religion. It was an early location for the preaching of Apollos, who had been trained in rhetoric in Alexandria, but originally only knew of John's baptism. Hence one of things Paul did was to teach the importance of baptism into the Spirit, and this was duly adopted though apparently Paul did not administer this himself to more than two or three.

Paul had begun by teaching in the synagogue, as he did initially in most places he visited, seeking to prove that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. A significant part of this involved upsetting people's traditional expectations of what the Messiah would be like, in particular seeing the Crucifixion, which most would have regarded as a symbol of defeat, as the heart of the Gospel. This led into an obvious criticism of the divisions among the Corinthians, whether as a result of choosing to follow different preachers, or misunderstanding what God would regard as wisdom or folly, strength or weakness - a whole anatomy of the roots of difference in status between people, whether formal or legal, like the difference between slave and free, or man and woman, married or celibate. At root, the problem arose when something that made one person different from another, was seen as making them *superior* (or *inferior*) to another.

This description of the problems faced by the churches in Corinth will make it clear that, notwithstanding the passage of two millennia (regarded by some as progress), very little has changed for the better. This last week in public life and politics has surely made most of us sick to the back teeth of lies and promiscuity dominating our television screens and creating an inescapable atmosphere of *voyeurism*. Or is that just a sign of age on my part? I hope not. For example, one text I have not heard mentioned this week is Matthew 25:36, 'I was in prison and you visited me.' I was glad that on the *Sunday* programme this morning Tim Stanley (whom I don't instinctively agree with) said that it was absurd to condemn someone for remaining friendly with a person who had served a prison sentence. I had a friend who spent time in prison and I did not cease to be a friend of his.

What Paul is saying in our text seems to be based on a prophetic text in Isaiah, not part of our OT lesson from chapter 58, but one that closely follows it in chapter 64, verse 4. The difference is that Paul's conclusion in verse 10 referring to the Spirit as the way in which we judge where true wisdom may be found, is his own; it has much in common with the writings of John though they were probably

written later in the first century. (Isaiah's conclusion is a reference to 'justice', which is the theme of those chapters in Isaiah. They also refer to a people God had called who deserted him and did not follow his word, perhaps something else that resonated with Paul as he reflected on it). But, given the importance Paul attaches to the Spirit in 1 Corinthians, it makes perfect sense, and it also links to the centrality of love as the primary Christian virtue in chapter 13.

Paul sums everything up in what he writes in Romans 12 (sub-headed in NRSV as 'New life in Christ'), verse 3: 'For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.' Or, as he put it on one occasion elsewhere, 'Do not keep thinking how wise you are'.

So why does this still matter today? Well, although there have been many changes in the world since the first century, this is one area in which I suggest there has been no change at all. Of all the sorry things in the last week's scandals, one common feature has been that in various respects people whom we might expect to respect have shown that in one way or another they assume that their position in society entitles them to behave in ways which in other respects would be unequivocally condemned and which the public expect to be not only condemned but punished. And it is why so many feel let down or betrayed, without any obvious way in which they will see redress. When will we see the things God has revealed to us through the Spirit?

DMT, 8th February 2026