



**Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2024**

**Readings: *I Samuel 3.1-10; Psalm 139; II Corinthians 4.5-12***

**Trinity I**

May these spoken words about so many written words, be by the Holy Spirit, a living word for us about the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ.

I don't think ancient Corinth and contemporary British cities were very much alike. There's two millennia between them. No place then was identical to any place now. Though I fancy their pace of life, I'd rather have today's drains. That said, there are aspects of Corinth then and of Cambridge now that resonate with each other. Both are cosmopolitan. Both know what prosperity is, and where it isn't. Both are that heady cocktail of people with much to be proud of and too much to be ashamed of. Both have seasons of success and flourishing, and crises of confidence and competence. And as for spiritual life, in both places and times The Church is always a typical human institution. Noble aspirations and achievements made possible by pliability to the Holy Spirit are mixed with flaws and fragilities indicative of our fallibility.

We know that church life in Corinth was multi-faceted. It was a novelty – being embryonic, the church at that time had nothing like the position or purchase that we have, even in our own so-called post-Christendom days. It was fruitful and effective in bringing people to faith, yet it was riven with factionalism and cliques, and Paul, though greatly valued, even loved, had his detractors. Moreover, there were countless issues to deal with in terms of politics both in the city and in the sanctuary. So, I dare to believe that were St Paul writing to us and not to Corinth, he would not be entirely thrown by what he found. Nor by how we are trying to juggle so many priorities, to do justice to so many things in church life. Indeed, I nurse the hope that he would understand why several different themes matter to us just this morning.

### **Church Anniversary**

He'd have 'got' the Downing Place Church anniversary - the gratitude we have expressed for the good hand of God <sup>1</sup> guiding us thus far, and bringing to flower some good Christian work. After all, he frequently included a moving word of thanks for the people to whom he wrote: to the Romans, for example: 'First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world.'<sup>2</sup> Moreover, I don't think he would have thought that six years wasn't long enough to celebrate. *Most* of the churches he visited were that new. And to us, as to so many churches with whom he corresponded, I imagine him writing with advice for us, maybe even admonition, as we grapple with issues and errors, and things we wish we'd thought of but didn't. But I also hear him saying, 'I give thanks to God every time I think of you, that you have aspired to be faithful and fruitful, even as you overcame the challenges of uniting, of renewing your premises, and of weathering the pandemic. In fact, over just a few years you have been so effective in small things I will ask God to enable more and more from you.'

### **New Member**

I think St Paul would have identified with our joy as David became a member, too. Time and again he names those disciples he knows and still cherishes in each church to which he writes, for example, Prisca and Aquila, and more than twenty others when he writes to Rome; Nympha in Colossae <sup>3</sup>; and 'every saint' in Philippi. <sup>4</sup> Paul treasures the body of Christ, with all its varying but mutually

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra 7.27-28

<sup>2</sup> Romans 1.8

<sup>3</sup> Colossians 4.15

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 4.21

interdependent parts, but he also has a heart for each of those individuals, as I believe he would have had, in Jesus' name, for David, saying, 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.'<sup>5</sup>

## D-Day Anniversary

And then there's the world in which we are set. As today and this week there are so many recollections of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day, we realise that 1944 was so different from the terribly dark days of 1940, when after just days in Number 10, Winston Churchill had said, '*I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.*'<sup>6</sup> Four years later the war was far from over, but by then the energy was with the Allies. Today, in Kharkiv, Rafah, or Darfur though, it can feel more like 1940. So, as we mark 1944's turning point of World War II, we might note that St Paul was no stranger to the impact of political struggles. At home in Judea, his people were occupied and oppressed, and Corinth, after one hundred years of desolation, had been re-founded, but as a Roman colony. That was his socio-political context. It was into such a febrile society that he brought his message, just as it is into such troubled times that we are called to be ambassadors for the Prince of Peace; to work for this generation's 'turning points', wherever they are needed. And even if we are able to turn off the news when Israel or Ukraine or anywhere else gets too heart-rending, we cannot turn our back on what's happening in our own streets. We need a word by which to be helped authentically to take our prophetic place in the public square, offering Christian perspectives, and pressing home the imperatives that emerge from Jesus' call to truth, to justice, to mercy and reconciliation, and to faith in the 'Source, Guide and Goal all that is'.<sup>7</sup> In the same way, we need a word to help us discern where to put our cross on 4<sup>th</sup> July, so that God's 'will is done on earth as it is in heaven'.<sup>8</sup>

## Ourselves

And then there's our own lives: this one's illness, and that one's fear that death is working in them; this one's stress levels, and that one's simmering anger; this one's exams, and that one's wedding; this one a victim of others' warring, and that one trapped by others' refusal to call out injustice; this one's new love, and that one's lingering grief; this one's thriving, and that one's messing up. When Paul writes his letters, he seems to echo the Psalmist, always holding in tension a skilful concern for individuals and for the community at large.

So, what do we find in this letter to the Corinthians to assist with this rich mixture of themes in today's service?

Paul is bold in his assurance. It's as if he understands how in 2024 we are passing through an unfamiliar era. At best it feels bizarre – unrecognisable. But for too many it is far worse than bizarre; today feels grim and tomorrow looks gloomy. And what does Paul say? 'Look beyond yourselves; look rather to Jesus.' Putting your trust in him, you are at one with he who overcame death and offers you life. It is the message of evil's weakness and of love's victory. So, we are to bring into the centre of contemporary life a message that is counter-cultural when compared with the dystopian feel of this day's world, where war, self and power are robbing people of the equilibrium – of the abundant life – for which God made us. With the Psalmist, and not least with Bernadette Farrell in her very special setting of Psalm 139, we can bring the message that 'safe in [God's] hands, all creation is made new.' At the same time, with Martin Luther King Jnr, whom I quoted in the current edition of *Place Matters*, we must forever hold in tension the truth of Jesus' own messages, which combined that 'tough mind and tender heart'.<sup>9</sup>

Now, friends on this anniversary do we not do well to acknowledge that we are not faultless in proclaiming the message of Jesus into today's world? And Paul doesn't expect us to be. We are like clay jars: weak, shatter-able, impermanent. But still God will use us. That's not *despite* our limitations and imperfections, but *because* of them - our weakness and down to earth humanity, our mistakes even, are

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 16.21

<sup>6</sup> Winston Churchill, House of Commons, 13<sup>th</sup> May 1940

<sup>7</sup> Romans 11.36 (New English Bible)

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 6.10

<sup>9</sup> King, Martin Luther, 1963 *Strength to Love* Chapter 1

so often the very thing that gets through to those whose ears are deaf to sophistication, eloquence and success. So, we persist: affected by what's going on all round us, but not crushed; perplexed about what the future holds, but not despairing. That is exactly what our USP is. As the words above the door from the Welcome Area have it, we proclaim not ourselves, but Christ crucified - that is, tackling the shortcomings of society not with our own good works, nor even with our carefully discerned political philosophies and manifestoes. No! However much it is folly to those who have no ears to hear, we tell of Jesus, who died that we might live; Jesus who did and who does 'love beyond the uttermost',<sup>10</sup> strong as death.<sup>11</sup> Alleluia! Thanks be to God! Amen

N. P. Uden

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<sup>10</sup> Fred Pratt Green 1903-2000, from the hymn, *An upper room*, RS 438.4.2

<sup>11</sup> Song of Solomon 8.6