

1 Corinthians 1:18-25; Psalm 19

Not many wise – a lesson from Corinthians for our day
No Qualifications Necessary

First, let me tell you a true story. A church in a fairly tough housing scheme ran a very successful holiday club. While there were a good number of helpers from the congregation there were also quite a few helpers from among the students from the nearby university who attended the church in term time. Among the ventures was a drop in café which ran most evenings during the mission fortnight. One of the teenage boys who had happily attended and shown real interest throughout was asked by one of the team if he had considered becoming a Christian. The answer the lad gave was not at all what the team member expected – and gave them and the Church a lot to think about! The answer went along the lines of “It’s been good, I’ve enjoyed being a part of it, and I have been thinking a lot about Jesus and yes, it means a lot to me, but I could never be a Christian – I’m never going to be a student!” All the young people on the mission team were students – unwittingly they had given this young lad (and maybe others too) the impression that they had to be students before they could become Christians. Are we, however unwittingly, sending out the wrong signals to people in our community about the nature of the Christian faith and about what it means to follow Jesus in our day and age? We don’t have university students in our congregation so it’s unlikely to be exactly the same as the congregation I described but perhaps there are other false signals that we may be sending out. Do we perhaps put too much emphasis on reading, thought and learning or on being able to vocalise our beliefs? May we give some the impression that you have to be clever or good at talking to be a Christian? Or do we somehow send out signals that some people pick up as meaning that you have to have some standing in the community, that you have to dress in a certain way or have particular interests or friends or that it matters where you live or work or whatever? “Qualifications” aren’t just exam results or certificates – they can be anything that a Christian congregation explicitly or unwittingly signals are part and parcel of what is required to be acceptable. Paul’s point is just as valid for us today as it was for the Christians in Corinth long ago - Watch you don’t put obstacles in the way of people coming to faith. Be careful that you don’t impose artificial barriers, hoops, qualifications or requirements that are simply unnecessary additions to the gospel. Someone once said to me that anything we seek to add to Jesus is only going to take away from him because he gives us everything we need. Equally, no matter how much we might try to do ourselves, without Jesus it will always fall short. It maybe isn’t what people want to hear, it might make us appear less appealing but essentially Jesus expects us to come to him empty handed – not with a load of “qualifications” whether they are paper ones, or those based on social convention. As the hymn puts it “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.” The only qualification for entry into the kingdom of God is to trust and follow the Lord Jesus. It is so easy to accidentally add things or practice our faith in a way

that detracts from the simple gospel message, which serves as a hindrance to visitors or those exploring the faith. We should take stock and review what we are doing, giving some conscious thought to our practices from the standpoint – not of regular worshippers or committed Christians but taking things from an inquirer’s viewpoint. The results may be surprising and not always what we expect or want – but we must rise to these challenges and seriously consider to what extent we are a congregation that can impact upon our community in a positive way with the gospel. Beware the extra “qualifications” that Jesus doesn’t require!

Non negotiables

It is of course possible to bend over backwards in an attempt to accommodate the gospel to what is sociably acceptable, but in so doing to lose the essentials. Elsewhere in the New Testament Paul advocates an open approach, a readiness to take sometimes quite radical steps to get alongside people whose lifestyle and beliefs are significantly different from his. “By all means, to save some.” But the “all means” does not include compromise or downgrading the good news of Jesus, and we are reminded of the significance of the cross. Crucifixion was a gruesome method of execution. If you are not convinced of that then get hold of a copy of “The Passion of the Christ” Mel Gibson’s film of the last week of Jesus’ life. Crucifixion wasn’t talked of in polite society. Everybody knew it happened – but frankly, it didn’t bear thinking about. To the Greeks, any thought that Jesus might be god in any shape or form was simply foolishness – a god who allowed himself to be crucified, executed was simply a contradiction in terms – sheer folly. They regarded Christians as fools, stupid, not worthy of being taken seriously for believing in a crucified god. Equally, traditional Jewish thinking couldn’t envisage the possibility of a crucified Jesus being the Messiah either – for they believed that anyone who was hung on a tree was cursed by God. Christians in the 1st Century were between a rock and a hard place when it came to the death of Jesus. Tempting as it might have been to play down the significance of the crucifixion to accommodate the beliefs of both Greeks and Jews the Corinthian Christians held fast – not with the intention of upsetting their neighbours (it most certainly was NOT a case of “a plague on both your houses”) but in defence of the essential truth of the gospel. For all that we should be open to getting alongside our neighbours, especially those whose beliefs and values differ significantly from ours (and maybe we should do an awful lot more of that that we realise) still there are limits. We don’t have the freedom to ditch the more unpopular elements of the faith – Jesus really was God, he really did die and he really did rise again. The Christian faith centres not on us making ourselves acceptable to God by own efforts – but on his love and forgiveness. And whether we like it or not, the Christian is still called to respond to Jesus’ love, to love and serve Christ and in his strength to love their neighbour for his sake. Any attempt to water down the faith, to make it more palatable to modern sensitivities is doomed to failure. Jesus told it straight, he turned his back on the pleas to tone it down – and he was willing to walk the road to Calvary which led to his death. We need to be more imaginative and committed in our understanding of our neighbour and in reaching out to them. We need to be careful not to allow our personal preferences to get in the way BUT there

are some things on which we simply can't compromise – central elements of the faith which are simply non-negotiable – among them is the divinity of Jesus Christ, the significance of his death and rising again and the need for us to be forgiven by him and to live our lives in his service. To dispense with any of these is to render the good news of salvation meaningless. No matter how hard we try (and we really must try) to get our message across in meaningful ways there is still going to be a modern equivalent of the “offence of the gospel” which Paul wrote about 2000 years ago. Even if we take every precaution to avoid putting obstacles in the way of inquirers, new believers, visitors there will still be those who will find the thought that they need to be forgiven offensive, who are determined that they will accept help from no one because they can manage it all themselves; who don't want to let the spiritual affect their lives at all. We must seek to keep the bridges open – but not at the cost of negating the gospel.

Strength made perfect in weakness

So much of what dominates the news concerns a play for power – whether it be among politicians, celebrities, business leaders, or different factions in any number of conflicts across the globe. But the scriptures turn the notion of power on its head. Society at large tends to imagine that the more power you have the more significant you are BUT the Bible tends to turn things upside down – our strength is made perfect in weakness so that God gets the glory, so that he receives the praise. It is often though our frailty that the overriding power of God shines through. And most notably in the victory Jesus won at the very moment of his seeming defeat on the cross. Rather than trying to accumulate as much power and influence as possible we ought to be ready to forego our power in preference to relying on the unconquerable power which raised Jesus from the dead – the power of God himself. Time and time again, down through the centuries faithful Christians have stood firm against the wiles of their opponents and suffered for the sake of Jesus and in defence of the gospel. Contrary to commonly held belief, power and influence are not the most important force on earth – it is the power of love, the love of God, made perfect in our weakness and frailty.

Jesus doesn't despise our using our brains, our minds – God gave them to us to use! But the fact is that we don't have to be clever or have a huge amount going for us to be a Christian. We must take care not to place unnecessary and unhelpful requirements in front of our neighbours who might be dipping their toe in the water and exploring the faith – instead we need to learn to reach out to them – but not at the cost of compromising the essentials of the faith. Don't underestimate the steps we can take – in holding true to the gospel while seeking to love our neighbour as we love ourselves.

May the Lord bless you! Amen.