

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

CORINTHIANS

8th February 2015

1 Corinthians 10:14-11:1

2 Corinthians 11:30-12:10

Sometimes, reading the Bible, it is easy to get an idealised view of things. I have often heard Christians who speak, for instance, as though all would be perfect if we could just go back to being just like the early Church, the Church in the book of Acts. I think that probably when people express this view they are thinking of the very early church in the few weeks after Pentecost, when the believers in Jerusalem were being added to daily, and were sharing all they had so that no one was in need. It does sound ideal.

But that is not the only model of early church that we know of, and I think that is just as well. Today I want to tell you the story, as far as we can make it out, of the church in Corinth. We have some verses from Acts which talk about it, and we have two of the letters Paul wrote to the congregation, which also tell us quite a bit of the story, as we read between the lines and work out what some throw-away comments mean. I love the story of the church at Corinth, because all was not sweetness and light, they did not go forward in serenity, they did not even always think very highly of their founder. In other words we are allowed to see their human faces, and learn from the way they were – warts and all, as Oliver Cromwell is reputed to have said.

Paul visits Corinth on his second Missionary journey. Corinth is in Greece, it is still in Greece, still a living city. When Paul arrived there it was the furthest from Jerusalem that he had yet travelled, arriving there from Athens, about 48 miles to the North-East. He was able to make a more protracted stay in the city than in some other places, staying there for a year and a half, making converts and discipling them. However Paul was always aware that his calling was to take the good news to the places where no one had yet heard it, so he then left Corinth, reported back to the base congregations in Antioch and Jerusalem and set out again. He next settled for a couple of years in Ephesus, which was right across the Aegean sea from Corinth, so he was able to keep in touch with the Corinthian congregation by letter and short visits.

So much for what we learn in Acts. From what he says in the two letters to the Corinthians which we still have – there was at least one more, because he refers to it in what we call 2nd Corinthians – it seems that the church in Corinth had sent to Paul a list of questions which they had, questions which he answers in his first letter. Some of the questions were a natural consequence of a gospel with Hebrew, Jewish roots coming into a Greek culture. The Greek Corinthians had been brought up to think that there is a division between what is physical, such as our bodies, and which were thought of as a bad or lesser thing, and what was spiritual, which was a good thing. But Hebrew thought, which was very much in line with a lot of modern medicine and psychology, said that the body and the spirit were indivisible. What we do with our bodies affects our spirits. We are whole people.

Because of that Greek way of thought, which has had a way of permeating European thought ever since those days, some of the Corinthian Christians wanted to deny the body its pleasures, while others wanted to do whatever they wanted with their base bodies, since the spirit was a separate and more important thing. So some advised complete chastity, while others went to prostitutes. Some of them wanted to be very choosy about what they ate, and others saw nothing wrong with eating food which had been offered to pagan idols before being brought to the market place to sell.

This is where our first reading today comes in. Paul wants to talk about the need to think of each other when we make decisions about how we should live. He agrees that offering meat to idols doesn't actually mean anything, since the idols are not really gods. But he also says that some of the Christians thought that since they weren't gods, they might be demons, and why would you want to have anything to do with the worship of demons? And then he talks about how you might be giving a poor witness to your non-Christian neighbours if they tell you where food that they are giving you come from, and you, knowing idols are nothing, went ahead and ate it anyway, giving the impression that you were joining in with pagan worship. Paul's premise is quite clear: sometimes we have to give up our freedoms, and not do things which we know are not wrong just so that we can be sure that we will not be either hurting someone else's faith, or giving what might be perceived as a poor witness to Christ. So if I am abroad and going into a church, to visit or for worship, I will find out what is considered the appropriate way to dress, even though I don't think that my uncovered head or uncovered arms, in warm places, will give God who made them any offence. And if you are with a Christian who considers the consumption of alcohol to be at odds with his faith, then you will not offer him a wee dram, and might even resist having one yourself.

Another thing which bothered the Corinthians was that some of them wondered why, since in their view the physical body was a lesser, if not actually a bad thing, they should believe in a physical resurrection – of Jesus and for themselves. And with all of these philosophical questions, they also weren't sure how to order their worship and how to use various spiritual gifts which were present amongst them. And on the most practical note of all, they wanted to know how to take up a collection for the poor Christians in Judea, and be sure that it would get there. And as you read the two letters it seems that this was the most vexing question of all! Money, it gets us every time!

Paul answers these questions in some detail in his first letter, and told them his travel plans. He was going to stay in Ephesus for a little longer and then visit the churches in Macedonia, then come to them and pick up the collection they were going to make. All well and good. But Paul did not keep to these plans. Instead he came to Corinth before going to Macedonia, and the offering was not ready. The Corinthians were embarrassed and there were accusations levelled against Paul, that he was not true to his word. There was one person in particular who stood up and challenged his authority. It seems that then Paul left abruptly and returned to Ephesus, from where he sent Titus to Corinth with the missing letter, which was a pretty sharp rebuke, demanding that the man who challenged him should be disciplined. In fact judging from what Paul says of that letter, I am not surprised it was lost. They probably burned it! No one wants to keep permanently what amounts to a written telling off.

Meanwhile there was a riot in Ephesus and Paul had to go into hiding. When he eventually met Titus again it seems that he learned that the challenger had been disciplined and the Corinthians had affirmed their support of Paul, but that now some Jewish Christians had arrived with impressive letters of introduction, who claimed to be super-apostles, who challenged some of Paul's teaching and demanded that he demonstrated his own credentials.

And so we come to our second reading. And in it we do not see Paul at his best, and he knows it. The so-called super apostles have obviously been boasting about their supremely spiritual experiences, and their pedigree. They are Hebrews, descendants of Abraham; they are from the mother church; they have suffered for the gospel. Paul knows how stupid it is to get into a boasting competition with such people, indeed with anyone, but he does it all the same, even while saying how mad he is to talk like this. And so in the passage before where we come in he talks of his Jewish pedigree and of all the sufferings he has undergone while travelling with the gospel. He has been imprisoned more, flogged more often, stoned, shipwrecked three times, and in constant danger of various kinds.

But really, this sort of boasting, this sort of display of pedigree is not what Paul wants to be doing. So instead of going on to boast in the way that these other people have been he says that he will boast about his weakness. So he boasts about his ignoble retreat from Damascus, let down in a basket over the walls. Hardly the triumphant progress of a super-apostle! And then he boasts about his spiritual experience which had resulted in him being given his famous and mysterious "thorn in the flesh". No one knows what that is. Probably it was some sort of physical ailment (though I have heard the half-serious suggestion that he is referring to a wife!). Whatever it was it was inconvenient if not painful enough for Paul to pray for it to be taken away. And his prayer was not granted, although it was answered. The answer was the message from God that "My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness." So Paul can conclude that "when I am weak then I am strong."

And so we see one of the themes which holds both of these letters together, one of the themes which Paul has found it necessary to unpack with the Corinthians, and it is the idea of weakness. The Greek culture which the Corinthians lived in and accepted without thinking, and which is the precursor of a lot of the culture which we live in and accept without thinking, was one which encouraged people to be strong. People should show strength, they should show leadership. When you see pictures of president Putin posing bare-backed on a horse, he is in direct descent from Alexander the Great and from other Greek leaders whose idealised forms are left to us in statuary. Physical strength and spiritual strength were to be valued. Rank was important as it showed strength. Riches were gained by strength. Worldly wisdom was strength.

And Paul turns that all around. In his first letter he reminds the Corinthians that not many of them were wise, powerful or noble by human standards when they accepted the call of Christ. But God does value people in the way that the world does. God chooses those who are weak to use so that no one can boast, so that everyone will know that what we accomplish for the gospel is God at work. And so we should treasure those who are weaker, especially those who are spiritually weaker, as he says in the first letter. And we should not seek to promote ourselves, but rely only on God as we find in the 2nd letter. Someone said to me recently that there are always some very odd characters to be found in a church, and that is how it should be. We are all odd characters. Jesus said that it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick and that he did not come to call the righteous but sinners.

I don't know how many of you, if I were to ask, would consider themselves to be strong and sorted people. Some of you give a good impression of that, but how many of us really think that of ourselves? I am not asking. The message which came first to the church at Corinth and still comes to us is that we don't have to be. God is not looking for the strong and sorted. He is looking for people who know that they have weaknesses, because when we acknowledge that, to God, to ourselves and even to others, then God's power can be seen more clearly and the gospel can go forward as we reach out to all the weak and broken people among whom we live. Amen.