

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

EXAMINE YOURSELVES .. PUT YOURSELVES TO THE TEST

Ross Noble

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My text this morning comes from 2nd Corinthians Chapter 13 and at verse 5.

“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?” Or, as the New English Bible puts it: “Examine yourselves: are you living the life of faith? Put yourselves to the test. Surely you recognize that Christ Jesus is among you.”

2nd Corinthians is a rather sharp-toned letter. It lacks the flowing passages of Pauline theology, which we associate with this apostle. It is a letter which reveals clearly the divisions within the early Church, the problems of being Christian in a largely pagan world – and, for this very reason, it is perhaps a letter we should turn to more often in our present-day situation – being Christians in a secular society. It is also a letter which lets us see Paul himself a bit more clearly, for here he sets out a defence of his own position within the church, and relates to us the practical problems and pressures of being a missionary.

Paul is out of favour with the Church in Corinth. He has been taunted with the accusation that he is a brave man with a pen at a distance, but won't come to the city for a face-to-face confrontation. Even more infuriating for Paul, he has been accused of using his position in the Church for his own personal glory, for his aggrandizement, and for feathering his own nest. In the letter, Paul refutes both accusations, and takes the Corinthians to task for their contentious ways. He is prepared to come again to Corinth; he is prepared to come in love, but if that means sharp words and plain speaking, so be it. But, by way of preparation for any debate on the various controversial issues, he throws out a challenge to the Church in Corinth: “*Examine yourselves..... Put yourselves to the test.*”

In this period of Lent, that challenge is a proper one for us to take up too. In the editorial in February's Life and Work, Lynne MacNeill suggested that Lent was a better time for new resolutions, than the 1st of January. It is a time of reflection – to examine ourselves, but it is also a time of decision-making in terms of our faith and our lives as Christians where we put ourselves to the test.

As it was in Corinth, so too in our modern society we find no difficulty in finding, in recognizing, controversial issues which divide our society today. A brief scan of the newspapers, the television channels, or the internet, makes that all too plain. In preparing for this service today, I have done that very thing. I have selected one or two topical issues which, quite clearly, are causing major divisions amongst us, within the Church and without.

The first issue that I have selected is military action. The enquiry into the circumstances behind the war in Iraq is currently sitting, and we are seeing the evidence of differences of opinion between politicians, between civil servants, and indeed among the military authorities themselves. The legality of war is only part of the picture, albeit a primary concern. Issues around the provision of the right equipment to our forces hangs heavily over the enquiry team, and lies heavily in the heart of grieving parents. And such concerns have by now rolled on into the NATO involvement in Afghanistan, and are now appearing on the horizon in terms of oil drilling off the Falklands.

And finally, in this first issue around military matters, there is the question of whether we should be spending tens of billions of pounds on new weapons of mass destruction. At a time of economic downturn, is this a ^{be seen as hypocrites as} we threaten Iran, and indeed invaded Iraq, to prevent them from having WMDs, while we acquire for ourselves bigger and better versions of the same thing?

So, what should our position be as Christians? What sort of stand should we be taking? I would not presume to answer those questions this morning. Rather, I would suggest that, before taking issue at all, we should listen to the words of St Paul: *“Examine yourselves .. Put yourselves to the test.”*

Equally contentious is the current debate around the question of “assisted suicide”. Examples appear to be cropping up almost weekly in the news media. A private member’s bill has been put before our own parliament at Holyrood in the past few days. Is this the “slippery slope” to state euthanasia, or legalizing the loving response of a parent or partner to intense suffering?

There will have been few of us who have not met some of these arguments in recent weeks. There will have been few of us who have not been ready to take a stance on one side or another of a political line. But how many of us have gone into the debate, or even come to a conclusion, based on an immediate, a knee jerk, reaction. Have we first examined ourselves; put ourselves to the test?

My third example, relates to the Church of Scotland itself. It is a debate which is still in its early stages, but it is one we can’t run away from. Can we, the Church is currently asking itself, carry on business as usual? Can we continue to be a “national” kirk, with a minister in every parish? Even if we could afford to do so, are there enough trained ministers coming forward to fill those charges? And if we spend an ever increasing proportion of the Church’s income in propping up the church legacy left to us by our Victorian forebears, can we also do Christ’s bidding to clothe the needy, feed the hungry, and tend the sick? These questions are coming up before kirk sessions and presbyteries, and no doubt will filter down to us all in days to come. How are we to tackle them? Where do we stand?

I could go on and on. As Christians we live in the real world. A world full of controversial and difficult problems: the world economy, the Israeli/Palestine divide, genetic modification, not just of plants but of people. We cannot, we must not, as Christians, hide our heads in the sand, or, like Pilate, send for the symbolic bowl of water and a towel. We are part of this world. These problems are our problems. These issues must be our concern.

But, like the Corinthians of old, should we go at it hot-headedly, or should we rather listen to Paul: *“Examine yourselves .. Put yourselves to the test.”*

Paul’s words have a universal significance. They are as relevant today as they were in Corinth 2000 years ago. They are words addressed to us here in Scotland, in Laggan and Newtonmore, and we would do well to heed them. We should regard each difficult and controversial issue that arises as a challenge – a challenge to examine ourselves, test ourselves, and see if we measure up.

Measure up to what? What yardstick should we use? If we keep changing the yardstick to suit the nature of the issue, then our self-examination will be no more effective than that of Holy Willie, in the poem by Burns:

“I bless and praise thy matchless might,
when thousands thou hast left in night,
that I am here before thy sight,
for gifts and grace;
a burning and a shining light
to a’ this place.”

Paul, however, does not leave us in doubt about the yardstick which must be used each and every time we put ourselves to the task.

“Examine yourselves: are you living the life of faith? Put yourselves to the test: surely you recognize that Christ Jesus is among you.”

There is the test. There is the yardstick. Are we living the life of faith? When we look at any of the burning issues of our time, in order to assess where we truly stand, do we do so in the light of our Christian faith, rather

than by any temporal standard? If we do this, then we get a new perspective, and, more importantly, a single perspective, no matter what the issue may be – political, social, or moral. Current moral standards or contemporary political practice are not adequate to provide for the Christian the main or sole yardstick in self-examination. Of course, they must be taken into account, for we do live in this world, and have helped, in however small a measure, to create these present-day standards. But always, says St. Paul, the final criterion, the ultimate yardstick, must be how we come to terms with these issues in the light of our Christian faith.

Not our Sunday faith! True assessment might be hampered by the warm glow of self-righteousness in which we leave the church on a Sunday morning. Returning to Holy Willie:

Yet I am here, a chosen sample
to show thy grace is great and ample.
I'm here a pillar o' thy temple,
strong as a rock.

No! We must use that more deeply hidden, more personal, yardstick – the faith that guides our day-to-day of faith asks Paul.

I'm sure I speak for more than just myself this morning if I answer Paul's question rather hesitantly – " Well, sometimes, but that faith is not always of the same strength, the same intensity. Sometimes the light grows dim, and the rock feels decidedly shaky. The yardstick is not as fixed as you suggest, Paul."

I am quite certain that those very arguments were put to Paul, and the other apostles, time and time again, as they have been put to priests and ministers ever since. Our day-to-day faith, our "faith for living" is less stable, more fluctuating than our Sunday faith tends to be. Paul knew this quite well, for he followed up one injunction with another: "*Are you living the life of faith? Surely you recognize that Christ Jesus is among you.*"

That is the bedrock of the Christian faith. Jesus Christ is among us. Whatever other tenets of our faith may falter and grow dim, if we can cling to that one thing, that we recognise that Jesus Christ is among us, then we can't go too far wrong.

So, to turn back to the problems and the controversial issues of our age – when we face up to these issues, and face up to them we must, we should do so by examining where they fit into our lives, if we are truly trying to live in faith with Christ. We should not simply ask, as if we are searching for some academic historical hypothesis, "What would Jesus have said about the starving millions of the Developing World?", or look blithely for a text from the Gospels which is relevant to massive bonuses for bankers. These things are not unimportant, and, as an aid to guiding out thoughts, they may be well worth doing. But the final assessment must come from us asking, "What is Christ saying about these things?" Christ is in the world now. What is his position on nuclear weapons? How does Christ want his Church to go forward in Laggan and Newtonmore, and across Scotland, in the 21st century? Then we must take time to listen for his voice. Let us make opportunities to approach Him in prayer. Let us take all the controversial issues that we face, and lay them at His feet. Once these things are done, we will find it easier to examine ourselves, and find that we are indeed endeavouring to live the life of faith, that Paul sees as the bedrock of our Christianity.