

THE TRUE GOSPEL

2 Corinthians 11:1-15

Well, today is advent Sunday, although I'm afraid I'm not going to say much about the second coming of Christ this morning, as that's not where our reading takes us. Today's reading is the beginning of Paul's so called 'Fool's Speech', which continues through to chapter 12 verse 13. It's not immediately clear who is the 'fool' and to whom the speech is directed. As per verse 1, Paul is the fool who speaks and he is talking to the Corinthian church – the 'you' of verses 4, 7, 8, 9 and 11 of our reading. Nonetheless, Paul is also directing this speech indirectly at his 'opponents', the 'super apostles' of verse 5 and the speech is necessitated by their behaviour in Corinth. I think Paul is only addressing these opponents, the so called super apostles, indirectly because he doesn't want to dignify them by addressing them directly. These super apostles are preachers who have come to Corinth from elsewhere (verse 4) and are the same people as the new ministers "who take pride in what is seen" of chapter 5 verse 12 that I preached about a few weeks ago and Paul was also talking about them at the end of chapter 10 that we skipped over in this sermon series. They and the Corinthians are the real fools of this speech.

So let's now look at our reading in more detail and you can find this on page [**] of the church bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be displayed on the screen. This is quite a difficult and complex passage, but I'll try and simplify things as much as possible. Let's begin by looking at verses 1-4:

“1 ¶ I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness; but you are already doing that. 2 I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. 3 But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. 4 For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a

different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.” (verses 1-4)

Paul is being extremely ironic here. He’s saying that they must “put up with” him for he has the jealousy of God for them, because he betrothed them to their “one husband”, to “Christ”. He’s the matchmaker who introduced the Corinthians to Christ as his bride and he’s keeping watch over the bride until the groom arrives. But he’s afraid that, as the serpent, the devil, in his cunning, deceived Eve, so too their minds might be corrupted from the single mindedness and purity appropriately directed to Christ. He’s concerned that the bride whom he’s watching over might be unfaithful to her husband. For if, indeed, someone “comes” proclaiming “another Jesus,” or if the Corinthians receive a “different Spirit,” or if they accept a “different gospel,” they “put up with it” (v. 4). The irony here is clear. They have positively welcomed the ones who are intent on destroying Paul’s authority. They are putting up with newcomers who are diverting them away from their one true husband, Christ, to whom Paul has joined them. They are being diverted from Christ because they are being led away from the true gospel message.

Earlier in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 and verse 13, Paul had characterised his speech as “right minded”, the very opposite of the “foolishness” of which he now speaks. But, he has to speak of himself as a fool, in order to avoid the charge of displaying self-commendation and boasting, which he had just repudiated when these characteristics were displayed in others at the end of chapter 10. In verse 2 Paul speaks of having betrothed the Corinthians to Christ. That’s rather strange imagery for us, but it does present a lovely picture of a father presenting a betrothed daughter to her husband with pride on her wedding day. How outrageous, therefore, that others have come in to Corinth presenting *another different* Jesus, presenting a different husband. Often evangelists concentrate on obtaining an initial declaration of faith, but Paul is not like that. He’s interested in making true disciples. He’s interested in the continued fidelity of the Corinthian church to Jesus. Only the true gospel message is able to unite us to and keep in close fellowship with our God.

The Greek translated by the NIV that Paul is “jealous for them with a Godly jealousy” could also be translated “I am zealous for you with God’s own zeal”. So Paul is not saying that he’s jealous in a possessive human sense, he’s saying that his care for the Corinthians is like God’s covenant care for his people. He’s saying that the relationship with Christ to which he introduced them precludes any worship of another different God, just as God’s relationship with the Israelites precluded their worship of any God other than Yahweh.

The Corinthians are not yet in outright apostasy – they haven’t completely abandoned their faith, but they are getting dangerously close. Paul is concerned that these new preachers will tempt them and turn them away from Christ just as Eve was tempted and turned away from God. He’s saying that these new preachers are cunning, like the serpent who tempted Eve in Genesis chapter 3, who was said to be “crafty” or “cunning” (Genesis 3:1). Eve was led astray because she allowed herself to be convinced that God’s word was not true. Similarly the Corinthians are in danger of being led away from the true gospel message. Note that Eve was not exonerated from her sin of disobedience because she was led astray by Satan, so by implication, Paul is saying that the Corinthians won’t be exonerated from their sin if they allow themselves to be led away from the true gospel and God.

Lets move on to look at verses 5 and 6:

“5 ¶ But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles". 6 I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way.” (verses 5-6)

Paul calls the newcomer preachers by the ironic title “super apostles”. Paul denies any inferiority to the newcomers, although he does acknowledge that he’s not a trained speaker. This may be a calculated concession, because it was by speaking or preaching that the newcomers were deceiving the Corinthians. However, Paul is insisting that he does have knowledge about Christ and the gospel and that he has made this clear to the Corinthians. I think it’s likely that

Paul deliberately refrained from using the devices of the trained speaker because he wanted people to be converted by the power of the Holy Spirit and the cross and not by his skilful and persuasive speech.

Let's now look at verses 7-12:

“7 Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? 8 I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. 9 And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so. 10 As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine. 11 Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! 12 And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about.” (verses 7-12)

In verse 7 Paul asks a rhetorical question, did he commit a sin by preaching the gospel free of charge? Here Paul is defending himself from the criticism that his preaching and teaching is worthless because he provides it free of charge, whereas the newcomers apparently take money or at least support from the Corinthians. It's often the case that we fail to adequately value what we obtain at no cost to us. Here, Paul is saying that he lowered himself through his manual work to support himself when he first came to Corinth, but has elevated the Corinthians through his teaching of the true gospel. Indeed, in verse 8, Paul declares that in addition to his own labours he “robbed” other churches” to serve the Corinthians. Paul was determined that the Corinthians should contribute nothing towards the ministry they received from him.

Certainly, Paul had breached the social conventions of those times by rejecting the Corinthians money, gifts and hospitality, which were conventionally given to those who taught and lectured. Although Paul is under pressure to change his policy in this regard he will not do so. Paul's evangelism ‘free of charge’ will not be silenced in

Corinth. Contrary to the Corinthian's view, this is not because he does not love them, he most certainly does. He says "God Knows" he loves them. I think the Corinthians might well, have been saying that he loved the Macedonians because he accepted their support, but did not love them because he would not accept their support. Indeed he promises to continue this policy of non-payment when he returns, to undercut the newcomers who want to stand on the same ground as Paul. Absurd as it may seem I believe the newcomers were trying to argue that their taking financial support from the Corinthians was a mark of their superiority and that is what Paul is challenging here.

It's interesting that nowhere in his letters to the Corinthians does Paul speak of their love for other churches or even of their love for one another. I believe that it was on account of their signal lovelessness that Paul wrote his famous love chapter, chapter 13 of his first letter to the Corinthians.

I believe that the verses we're considering reflect Paul's deep sense of hurt that the Corinthians can possibly prefer the unorthodox (perhaps heretical) teaching and preaching of the newcomers to his own correct and orthodox teaching. Although Paul had betrothed the Corinthians to Christ by means of his gospel teaching, in their eyes he is now just a fool to be put up with. Clearly Paul feels a great sadness over his rejection by the Corinthians in favour of these newcomers who are not teaching correctly. Nevertheless, in verse 12, Paul reaffirms that he will not take any support from the Corinthians when he returns to them. He wants to cut the ground from underneath the newcomers.

In our final verses Paul attacks these newcomers, whom he brands as false apostles:

"13 For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. 15 It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve." (verses 13-15)

Having previously gently criticised the newcomers, who he referred to as ‘super apostles’, Paul now attacks them roundly. Paul says they are “deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ”. They seek equality with or even superiority over Paul, but, as their actions show, the truth is otherwise. He goes on to say that they are children of Satan masquerading as servants of righteousness, as Satan himself does. Their end will be what their actions deserve. If Satan himself can disguise himself as a minister of righteousness, then it’s no surprise if his followers use the same tactics. It’s a work of deception, which brings us back to Satan’s deception of Eve in the Garden of Eden. Certain Jewish legends speak of Satan disguised himself as an angel when he came to Eve and caused her to fall into sin. These so called ministers are causing the believers in Corinth to fall away from the truth, just as Satan caused Eve to doubt the truth of God’s word. Satan’s strategy is always to lie and distort God’s words, because when the word of God is distorted and we accept or believe that distortion it can and will cut us off from God. This is a clear warning to all of us who seek to teach the word of God. We must direct people to the true gospel message of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross for our sins and his Lordship and glorious resurrection and tell them to repent of their sins and to turn to Christ - for salvation cannot be found anywhere else. By no other name can we be saved.

So what have we learned this morning. We see that we must not allow ourselves to be deceived and led away from the true gospel message, as the Corinthians were in danger of doing. Believing in anything apart from the true gospel message cuts us off from fellowship with God. We must let nothing, whether it be false teaching or preaching or the pressure of worldly views on moral and other issues, lead us away from the true gospel message or undermine our faith and belief in it. We need to hold firm to Christ and the truths of what he has done for us. Indeed we must lead others to the true gospel message; which is to bring them to belief in Christ’s sacrificial death and resurrection and urging them in full repentance of their sins to accept Christ as their Lord and Master. For salvation can be found nowhere else. By no other name except that of Christ can we be saved.

As John said in chapter 3 of his gospel:

“16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”
(John 3:16-18 NIV)

Let's all hold firm to the true gospel message, not allowing ourselves to be diverted from the smallest detail of it and let us lead as many others to faith in this true Gospel message as we possibly can.