

Well done in getting to church today, despite the weather and various (as ever) road closures. I wonder why we've come? Maybe it's habit, maybe it's to be in this place of quiet and reflection - hopefully it's also to discover something about the hidden depths of God (read v9). Is that our desire, to receive something profoundly deep, rather than the shallow, to receive the gifts that God has prepared for us which are beyond our human expectation?

(prayer)

Anyone who's seen David Attenborough's blue planet will know that the depths of the darkest deepest oceans are one of the greatest mysteries on earth. As human exploration of the depths takes place - strange new creatures are being discovered there; amazing and wonderful. As we return to our study of 1 Corinthians, today chapter 2, next week chapter 3, Paul describes how God's Spirit reveals amazing and wonderful new truths about hidden things - 'even the depths of God' - as we look in detail at this passage, dare we allow the Spirit to probe deep and shed more light into the deepest parts of our lives? I pray that we will.

The second chapter of 1 Corinthians contains two of Paul's "greatest hits" verses.

At the beginning of the chapter, he says, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (verse 2). At the end of the chapter, Paul declares, "We have the mind of Christ." It's so easy to get distracted, isn't it - I wonder how many of you when you came into church today noticed the change in the furniture (lectern, communion rail), or how warm/cold the church was (or wind blowing...) - distractions which take us away from the centrality of the cross of Christ, the place of the Spirit in forming our Christian lives, the role of the Father as a focus for our prayers and worship.

Paul speaks of the cross in order to speak about what can be perceived.

During an eye exam, the person doing it says to you something like, "Things are going to get very blurry for a minute." Lenses click by and in an instant, where there had been legible letters, now there are just grey-black blobs in front of you. No force of will or act of squinting can bring the blobs into focus. You cannot see what was there a moment before.

Or maybe the experience happens in reverse: things start out blurry and then, with the correct lens to look through, the whole world comes into focus.

In Paul's experience and in his preaching, "Jesus Christ and him crucified" is shorthand for the event that acts as a focusing lens for every else. "Christ crucified" is not the eye chart itself but the small piece of glass between Paul and the chart. It reveals the wisdom of this age (verse 6) as so much blur. And it brings into focus what God has revealed through the Spirit (verse 10). In this context, "Christ crucified" is not *what* Paul sees but *how* he sees.

At a recent meeting in St Mary's Downe a member of the community asked what the church stood for - and that made me think - I'm glad I didn't respond then, but the respond according to Paul is Christ Crucified - everything else we do or say are seen through that, otherwise we become another group within our community meeting for some other reason. This is what sets us apart - we discover through the Scriptures that Christ died for me, and it's that news that we are called to share.

So Paul tells the Corinthians that when he was with them, everything he knew -- from the meaning of the Jewish Scriptures to the wisdom of their best thinkers to the status of various individuals in the community -- he perceived through the lens of Jesus Christ crucified. That is how he saw them then, and how he now sees them with their conflicts and questions about leaders, worship, spiritual gifts, table fellowship, the resurrection, and all the rest.

This interpretation of “Jesus Christ and him crucified,” begs two questions: (1) what does the shorthand, “Jesus Christ and him crucified” mean? and (2) what does it bring into focus?

The cross of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:17), the word of the cross (1:18) and “Christ crucified” (1:23) are all shorthand for God’s intervention into this age, to bring about a new one. I’ve been reading a book called ‘Edwin’ – it’s about the king of Northumbria of that name, but more so, the missionary priest Paulinus who shared the good news of Christ with this largely heathen nation. It’s the story of how the Christian faith came alive (again) in Britain. Paulinus preaches Christ Crucified to a warring nation, who cannot believe that God would allow the hero to die. Yet that’s the gospel we preach. The intervention of God the father involved the self-emptying and self-giving love of Christ, love that culminated in Christ’s giving his life -- and not for righteous people, which Greeks and other hero worshippers could understand, but rather, for the ungodly – in other words, everyone, including you and me.

This foolishness (2:14; cf. 1:18, 23-25) is the beginning of the new creation, one in which old ways of defining ourselves and others (Jew/Greek, strong/weak, wise/foolish) no longer describe the real world. We are more united with a Christian from another ethnic background than with our neighbour. As Paul says later “Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

But why does Paul bring all of this up in the middle of a discussion about loyalties to certain leaders and their status? A discussion that begins at 1:10 and which he resumes again in 3:4.) It’s because the cross brings two things into focus: (1) Neither Paul nor the Corinthians have status left to defend, and (2) the mind of Christ (1:10, 2:16) is what unites. Last night I sang in St Mark’s biggin hill – at our final rehearsal last Monday as soon as I entered the church I knew there were lilies there – the perfume permeated the whole place – it’s something I am particularly aware of - as the Spirit of God fills our thoughts, minds, deeds – so that too permeates our lives and the lives of Christians around us.

Now this is as important now as it was then. We live in a world, a country, where Christians are marginalised, even persecuted for faith- and that should come as no surprise. The challenge is that in a world full of threats, we cannot defend ourselves *and* testify to the way of Jesus Christ at the same time.

Something like this is going on with Paul as he writes the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians. “What then is Paul? What is Apollos? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each” (3:5). What is the worst that can happen to Paul: that the Corinthians cease to regard him as a leader? That he loses the popularity contest? None of this matters.

He and the other leaders are servants. Elsewhere, Paul will say this even more explicitly: “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Galatians 6:14).

In the opening verses of 1 Corinthians, Paul urges his readers to be united in the same mind. David Fredrickson has written extensively on the Christ hymn of Philippians 2 and the “same mind” Paul exhorts there as “imagination in action.” I’m sure many of you have It’s like working with others on a physical task, maybe like moving some chairs – if one person is pulling one way, and the other the other, it doesn’t work – it’s a waste of effort.

You have to share at least elements of a vision, to be of “one mind” on the nature of the task and its execution. Even so, as vital as it is, shared imagination does not move the chairs. Action -- walking, pushing, pulling, steadying -- is required, too, as are mid-course communication and correction. The whole thing is common work in which people with different functions share, if only for a few moments, the same mind. The actions of those with the mind of Christ will be characterized by self-giving love. The leaders will act as servants (3:5). The strong will refrain from exercising their freedom at the expense of the weak (cf. 1 Corinthians 8-10). Love will prove greater than prophecy, tongues, and knowledge (13:8).

All this is the work of the Spirit (v10) – allowing the Spirit to search our minds, to allow the Spirit’s life to permeate our thoughts. This is to have the mind of Christ - being able to imagine the new creation and participate in it before it has come into focus for others; to focus on the Cross – to live lives through the lens of Jesus Christ crucified.

Prayer... Come Holy Spirit... time of quiet reflection, then prayer page 27