Sermon for 7th in Ordinary Year A

Readings: 1 Corinthians 3:10-23; Matthew 5:38-48.

i

The rival factions in Corinth are reminded by St Paul that he merely laid the foundation of their faith, which is Jesus Christ himself. How Christians subsequently build upon that foundation is completely for them to decide.

Faith is a co-operative venture between the believer and the Holy Spirit. God does not do all the work for us; we must work under the Spirit’s guidance and therefore some will build well and others will build poorly. Some will put in little effort or choose unhelpful guides. The responsibility for the state of the Church is ours.

Fortunately, whatever the condition of our Christian lives, we will escape with our souls even if the poverty of our Christian witness crashes and burns around our ears at the Day of Judgement – so long as we have sought to build on the one true foundation – which is Christ crucified.

Even those who claim to preach the “full gospel” or those who look to infallible statements of faith will have to endure the judgement that reveals what is good, precious and holy, as well as endure the shame of what is revealed to have been poor, shoddy and unreliable. This will be true of all Christians and all Christian denominations to some degree. It is part and parcel of our humanity.

Methodists sometimes speak of the indefectibility of the Church. This simply means that we acknowledge that some of our ways and beliefs will not survive the Day of Judgement, but we cannot know which they are beforehand, otherwise we would change them. But we can believe that God loves us so much that God would never allow us to build so poorly that we abandoned our true foundation and with it lost our salvation altogether. We shall, by God’s grace, escape like a man dashing out of a burning building, no matter how erroneous our understanding of faith and worship.

The danger that Paul sees is the temptation to import worldly wisdom into the Church and allow the values of the world to override the apparent foolishness of the kingdom of heaven.

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight (v19).

Innocent error is one thing, however, and can be forgiven, but those who deliberately try to demolish Christ’s Church will find no reprieve.

If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him (v17).

Paul could hardly be more forthright than that.

ii

A tooth is a tooth and once lost is lost forever; a strike on the cheek is likewise a real injury and cause of offence, but they are relatively small infringements of acceptable behaviour in the wider context.

Perhaps in societies where public honour is of such importance, we should not too airily dismiss the distress these affronts would cause, but in the end, they are rather minor injustices.

Break the cycle, says Jesus. Don’t pass on evil by getting even, just because the Law permits it. Stop evil in its tracks by absorbing it.

A cloak may be more valuable in 1st Century Palestine than in our age of walk-in wardrobes and so the Law decreed that you could not sue a man for all his clothing. When forced to carry another man’s burden for a mile, as soldiers of the Roman occupation could demand, go the extra mile, says Jesus. Do not demand your rights and so perpetuate the confrontation. Likewise, giving alms to the person in need, or lending to the person who needs more, are acts of a generous and gracious spirit. In this way, they reflect the life of the kingdom of God.

No wonder Paul has to urge believers in Corinth to resist thinking in a worldly way and to remain faithful to the foolishness of the kingdom of heaven. Absorbing the pain, swallowing the affront, giving or lending to those in need, fulfilling unpleasant civil duties and renouncing your legal rights of recompense may look foolish in the eyes of the world, but they are the ways Christ expects his followers to live. The kingdom has its own set of rules. If we do not live by these exacting standards, in what way are we any different to the tax collectors and non-believers?

iii

If these actions do model the values of the kingdom, why is that so?

The answer is clear: God did not insist on his legal rights of redress against sinful humankind. God did not perpetuate the cycle of sin and punishment forever.

Jesus absorbed the insult, accepted the affront to God’s honour, and refused to pass on the pain of deserved punishment, but took it on himself to bring it to a close.

Insisting on your rights can sometimes be a way of bringing justice for others. Insisting on your rights can sometimes be a way of resisting evil. Demanding your due respect is sometimes a way of curbing bullying behaviour and sparing other potential victims. But the way of Christ demands taking the pain in order to stop the pain from passing on.

Such a way of life demands more than most of us can sustain; it goes against the ways of the world and we can look foolish and weak. No wonder we so often build such poor examples of Christian faith. We compromise in the face of the cost of the gold, silver and precious jewels which are the rewards for sacrificial living. So we make do with straw and wood and paper, which are the little acts of kindness, the small charitable gift, the anonymous stance against injustice, and the sundry acts of common decency.

The saints inspire us to strive for better things. So if you find an opportunity this week for aspiring to a speck of gold in your Christian life, I urge you to dare to take the leap of faith. Take the pain, swallow the pride, go the extra mile and stop the evil from passing on. Those are the jewels Jesus will be looking for amidst the ashes of our lives come Judgement Day.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard May 2016**