

A sermon preached by Bishop Brian Farran in Christ Church Cathedral Newcastle on Epiphany 2 2011.

Text: 1 Corinthians 1: 1-9.

'I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus,⁵ for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift...'

This is an affirmation from Saint Paul of one of the first churches in non-Jewish territory. This affirmation is theologically rich, and surprising too because of what was happening within the church at Corinth.

Corinth in the time of Saint Paul was an economic powerhouse in the Roman Empire. It was the equivalent of today's London or New York. It was a city that attracted people who wanted to make it. Corinth had that kind of dynamism and that kind of atmosphere. Those who lived in Corinth, if they were freemen, were very competitive. Corinth was full of people intent on climbing the social ladder, intent on leaving their former lives of inferior status behind for ever.

Corinth was a Roman colony named in honour of Julius Caesar who had rebuilt Corinth just before his assassination in 44BC. Its official Roman name was *Colonia Laus Julia Corinthiensis*.

The old Greek Corinth had been destroyed by the Roman Army in 146BC. The Roman Consul Lucius Mummius had levelled the city when it refused to dissolve a political association, the Achaian League. The Corinthian men were killed and the women and children were sold into slavery. For the next hundred years only a handful of squatters occupied the site of the levelled city.

Julius Caesar populated the new Corinth with conscripted Italian, Greek, Syrian, Egyptian and Judean freed slaves together with Roman Army veterans. It was a kind of soldier-settlement scheme.

The new Corinth was an ethnically diverse city full of people intent on building a new life for themselves. It was a swaggering city where boasting was the norm in conversation. We can detect this clearly from Saint Paul's declarations within the Corinthian correspondence *not* to boast!

Further on in chapter 1 Paul declares

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are,²⁹ so that no one might boast in the presence of God.¹

One New Testament scholar comments about Corinth

What most controlled [Corinth's] life and defined its moral character was not sexual decadence, but a relentless competition for social status, honour, wealth, and power. In this respect it was not unlike other urban centres of the day, where people with means could hope to gain higher social standing and greater honour, by contributing to the public welfare, and by becoming the patrons of those who needed support and would lionize them for it. It was to such a city that Paul came preaching the gospel of Christ.²

The new Corinth was about 100 years old when Saint Paul arrived in the city to begin his strategic mission. Julius Caesar had designed the new Corinth as a Roman city. Paul worked in Corinth from about 51AD for eighteen months. Then he went to Ephesus.

¹ 1 Corinthians 1: 27-29.

² Victor Paul Furnish. 1999. The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p2.

I visited the ruins of Corinth together with Bishop Malone three years ago when both bishops co-lead an ecumenical pilgrimage that traced some of the steps of Saint Paul. In fact, the Newcastle ecumenical pilgrims wandered around the agora (the city centre) of Corinth and stood most likely where Saint Paul may have given some of his first evangelistic addresses.

We celebrated a Eucharist near the ruins, shaded from the very hot sun by a grove of trees. We read from this letter to the Corinthians and recalled Saint Paul saying to the Church in Corinth,

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread,²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for * you. Do this in remembrance of me.'²⁵ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.³

I like my pilgrim-companions found this experience of Eucharist at Corinth deeply reflective. For still within the ruins of Corinth we could recognize the Imperial Roman apparatus of statues to gods and emperors –the entire civic apparatus that was the dominating political and the intertwined religious ideology that controlled the social thinking of the then known world.

Saint Paul and his companions must have seemed miniscule within such a city as Corinth as they began to preach about Jesus Christ. And even with the growth of the church in Corinth, the church must still have appeared slight within a population of tens of thousands of people whose attitudes are not too dissimilar from cultures today in the West infected as they are by post-modernism.

The mood of Corinth was such that the church that Saint Paul founded was vulnerable to divisive issues within its membership, to distortions about what the gospel entailed in personal and corporate life and to rival itinerant evangelists who played into the Corinthians' sense of self-importance. Thus not long after Saint Paul left Corinth for Ephesus he received news of the fragmentation of the Corinthian Church with internal issues that threatened to splinter it and thus discredit the Gospel within a city that thrived on religious pluralism of the self-enhancing kind.

New Testament scholars think that Saint Paul may have written four letters to the Church in Corinth of which we have two in the New Testament. 2 Corinthians may contain a part of one of the missing letters.

Saint Paul tried to respond to the issues that threatened the church in Corinth by sending apostolic letters that contained his theological reflection, his practical pastoralia and a rehearsal of his own spiritual biography. Clearly his relationship with the Church in Corinth was at times tendentious, frustrated and yet heart-wrenching.

When you read what follows in 1 Corinthians it is even the more impressive that Saint Paul at the very beginning of this letter that would have been read to the gathered Corinthian Church addressing its turmoil, says to the church members who had already caused him grief and anxiety, **'I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind 'so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift...'**

This is a high theological statement of the effect of believing the Gospel and acknowledging Jesus as Lord. Within this one sentence Saint Paul affirms that faith is a gift from God to us and that faith changes our life perspectives and influences us to think like Christ. Further, that God's grace gifts us

³ 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

for living effectively as Christians so that as the Church, we can credibly commend the Gospel to others. This was of course paramount in the pagan environment of Corinth. It is now paramount for us as the Church seeking to commend the Gospel in the pluralism that marks contemporary Australian society.

The Corinthian correspondence gives us a portrait of Paul as 'theologian', in that it discloses him engaged in serious theological reflection on Christian understandings of God and of human existence, and concerned to communicate those understandings to others intelligibly, and in a way that will make a difference in their lives.⁴

Saint Paul is no remote academic developing theoretical statements about Christian life unrelated to the real issues which the church at Corinth was enduring. Even within the turbulence that was deep and destabilizing Saint Paul offered theological rocks derived from the gifting of God to believers and from God's high purposes for the Church. What Saint Paul said to those disputing Corinthians, Saint Paul still says to the Church wherever this Scripture is read and studied.

There is a vibrant continuity between the Church in Corinth in the early 50s of the first decade of the first millennium and the Church in the Western world in this second decade of the second millennium.

Over the next six Sundays we will be reading portions from the early chapters of this first letter to the Corinthians. We will encounter Saint Paul as a practical pastoral theologian addressing contentious divisive issues in a young church, appealing to the Corinthian Christians for maturity in faith, and reflecting theologically with them to lead them to greater awareness of what God has given them through faith and therefore what is required of them to commend the Faith.

Saint Paul will speak to us through this correspondence and require us to appreciate along with the Corinthians '**the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus,⁵ for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift...**'

This church is not lacking in any spiritual gift. That is the apostolic declaration!

This is the new reality that faith creates in each of us.

This is what we have to detect and honour amongst ourselves.

⁴ Victor Paul Furnish. 1999. P. xv.