

1 Cor 1:3-9 Sermon for 10am – Advent Sunday

What is the Christian faith about? Who are we in relation to it? How can we live our lives rubbing shoulders with real people with real issues and real disagreements whilst also sharing the same set of beliefs?

Our bible reading from 1 Corinthians is all about this. If you haven't read it before, this little book of the Bible is a letter sent to the recently-formed church in a place called Corinth. And this church had issues. They kept falling out about which spiritual leader they should align themselves with, about ethical issues, about the status of the gods that were worshipped around them in Corinth, about how they should act in church and about whether Jesus really rose from the dead or not. Basically, they were falling out about everything – exactly the kinds of things that Christians fall out about today! Just like the church of England falling out about gender and homosexuality, about doctrinal, theological issues, about styles of worship, about getting the balance between sacred and stuffy, and about the status of other religions. Nothing's really changed!

And this little section we read this morning gives us the writer, Paul's, first entry into addressing this. The whole letter goes into each issue in more detail, but it is really useful to us to look at Paul's first response. It tells us what the real crux of the Christian faith is. It tells us who we are in relation to it and in relation to all the concerns that seem so large that we tend to fall out about and argue over. And finally, it reminds us to thank God for all that we have received from him.

The Christian faith is about Jesus. He appears in every single verse of our reading and is central to the whole passage. He is, with God, the source of grace and peace. He is how we have been given God's grace. It is in Jesus that we the church has been enriched and strengthened and made blameless and it is in Jesus that we are called into being community together. This paragraph is full to the brim of Jesus and what he has done for us and what God has done for us through Jesus. If you go through and remove all mention of Jesus and God, you are left with nothing. The Christian faith is about Jesus.

And the Christian faith is God's initiative, not ours. Everything in the reading is thanksgiving for what God has done through Jesus. One of the biggest criticisms of Christianity and religion in general is that we are accused of simply inventing a God based on our hopes and dreams, a God who can be like a huge heavenly Santa Claus who we ask to help when we struggle and we need to stop us despairing about what life throws at us. Obviously, there's a lot that can be said about that, but the reading this morning, is clear that God isn't a human initiative, Jesus isn't our invention; instead all things come from God and it is through Jesus that we have grace and peace. It reminds us that rather than God being just a bit-part in our story; instead, we are part of God's story.

The Christian faith is all about Jesus. And this passage helps us to relate to this. It's Advent Sunday, the day when we start thinking about Christmas – as if we hadn't started already! But Advent is a season in the church calendar where we wait for Christmas as we anticipate the celebration of God coming to earth as a baby. Again, it's all about Jesus. Advent enables us to situate ourselves again in relation to this profoundly exciting story. It gives us time to think about what it means for us that the baby Jesus was born in a stable 2000 years ago.

And that's because, again, like our reading this morning, Advent reminds us that it is God's story that we are a part of, rather than being all about us. The people in Corinth were all falling out about

issues of theology, ethics and Church service style. Paul's response was to remind them of the centre of the faith and where they stand in relation to it. The people in Corinth were people who were involved in God's great narrative. They received God's grace and peace to his world. Where God gives enrichment through Jesus and strengthens their witness to it so that they aren't lacking anything spiritual, they receive it. Where God keeps them strong to the end, no matter what is thrown their way, and where God has called them, the people in Corinth are recipients of God's gifts given through Jesus.

Whose story is it? It's God's story. It's Jesus' story, God's son. The people in Corinth relate to it as players in a story, scripted by God. Rather than worry about arguments and issues between them, Paul's first response is to raise their eyes. They are important parts of a bigger reality. They are playing in a bigger game with higher stakes than their day to day squabbles and quibbles and preferences. God is at work in the world and they have been called and equipped to be part of that work. From that angle, all the pride issues, all the petty conflicts, all melt away. There's something much bigger going on here. They are being strengthened as they wait for Jesus to be fully revealed. There will come a day when all of this is over and God's big story is at a chapter-break before an amazing finale. The people of Corinth are to anticipate this day and prepare for it.

Similarly, today, the Church of England is well known for having its issues, its divisions, its anxieties and its foibles. Each parish church has its pressures, its preferences, its share of people pulling in different directions. I'm not dismissing any of these issues – Paul addressed them later in his letter – but actually, perhaps we all need to get what Paul is doing here. The Corinthian church needed to be all reminded that these issues weren't the centre of their faith, and the faith wasn't all about them. They were privileged people in God's story, but it is God's story, not theirs and certainly not ours.

We each live at a one particular point in God's story; a cosmic history told across all reality, and a one-way ticket toward eternity. Whatever our views, whatever our theological stance, our worship-style preference, our politics, our ethics, family situation, our personality and our own particular hang-ups; we are God's community, called by him on his initiative, worshipping Jesus, the central actor in all history; Jesus, who is God born as a human, joining us in the dust; and we are strengthened and given grace for the important part God has given us in this infinite, universal drama.

How privileged we are to be counted a part of such a program. How amazing to be part of a divine plan to re-create God's world. For Paul and for us, this can only result in thanksgiving to God for such a promotion – each one of us raised from the dust to carry out our role on the cosmic stage where angels watch and applaud. No wonder Paul starts his letter in thanks to God!

So Jesus is the centre of our faith, we relate to him in that we are recipients of God's grace through him, lifting us out of our pointless, meaningless existence and placing us within God's cosmic program for the saving of existence itself. Sounds like a film doesn't it? We are a community who God has called and we simply respond to that call. Thanks be to God!

But how does this change how we rub along together as individuals with all our disagreements, different priorities, different preferences and different theology? I hope this is now obvious. Paul addresses these real issues later in his letter, but from a context of God's greater picture and always thanking God for his people. Paul even thanks God for the people he strongly disagrees with. For

me, I've heard so many people talk about blessing those who hurt you in church, or thanking God for them through gritted teeth; but I don't think that's what Paul is doing here.

Rather than Paul praying, "Thank you God for the people in Corinth despite their arguments and all their imperfections and the fact they've let me down and in fact I'm having trouble liking them at all, but thanks anyway." Paul is thanking God for their place in God's plan, for the grace that has been given them, for the gifts they have been given, for the calling they have, and for the fact that on the day when Jesus returns, they will be "blameless". What a thing to consider these people blameless! What a thing for us to thank God for those who we don't get on with around church, or have massively different theological views from, or who are always forcing us to do things in church in a way which we don't particularly like or feel comfortable with. Could we thank God for them, not through gritted teeth, but in view of Jesus being the centre of faith? In view of them receiving all things from Jesus just as we do ourselves? In view of them having a place on God's cosmic stage, just as we do? And in view of the fact that we are all recipients from God and none of us is anything else?

We can address our issues and work on them, but do so from within this context of God's grace and our thanks and no other. That's how we rub along together as a bunch of individuals with different preferences, standpoints and priorities. It is because God is faithful and by him you were each called into the fellowship of Jesus. It is because Jesus has enriched you in so many ways so there is no lack in any spiritual gift as we all wait together for Jesus to be revealed among us more clearly and for the day when Jesus will return and we will be blameless. It is because the grace of God has been given to us in Jesus. And it is because of all this, that I, with Paul, can say – "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Let it always be so.