

1 Corinthians 4

We come today to the fifth in our sermon series on the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. We are considering the fourth chapter of that letter, which we have just heard.

We have already looked in this sermon series at Paul's concern about divisions in the church, and about the difference between human wisdom and spiritual wisdom, and about how he had laid the foundation of the church in Corinth.

The chapter divides in three – these have been described as, firstly verses 1 to 7 servants and stewards – secondly verses 8 to 13 kings and paupers, and thirdly verses 14 to 21 fathers and children.

In the previous chapter Paul had been describing how he had laid the foundation of the church in Corinth “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.” (Verse seven)

Apollos was another Christian teacher who travelled around the churches of the eastern Mediterranean.

“So then” Paul continued “Men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God.”

The Corinthian Christians were inclined to focus on following one Christian leader or another. Apollos, Peter, Paul or Jesus, as we have heard in chapter 1 verse 13.

Some of them were being critical of Paul, to which he responds in verse 3 “I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will

expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God." (Verses 2 to 5). What really matters is not what other people think of us but what God thinks of us.

Here, as in some others of Paul's letters, he refers to the return of Jesus expecting him to come again soon. "When the Lord comes" he said. Indeed the Lord Jesus himself taught his followers to be living in constant expectation of his return, as he illustrated for example in his parable of the 10 bridesmaids, five of whom, in the days long before electricity, had brought enough olive oil for their lamps, and five who had not, and who were excluded from the wedding feast, because they were off at the corner shop when the bridegroom arrived. In the same way we are always to be ready for the coming of the bridegroom of the church, the Lord Jesus.

So here Paul writes "Judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes." Paul is not concerned what the Corinthians think of him; what matters to him is what the Lord thinks of him.

Then he writes "I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit". It appears from that that it was not Paul and Apollos and Peter to whom the Corinthians were looking as leaders of factions in the church, but some of their own number, for he says they were not to "take pride in one man over against another." (Verse 6).

He continues "For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" (Verse seven).

As I have mentioned before, in my last church in Portsmouth whenever, in my 19 years there, I ascended the pulpit steps to preach I was confronted by four lines carved into the wooden rest

which was ready to receive my sermon notes. Each of the lines began “Not I, but Christ” concluding with the last line “Not I, but Christ be seen, be loved, be heard”. So, whenever somebody has kindly thanked me for a sermon, I have tried to redirect the thanks upstairs. I have nothing that I have not first received from the Lord. So, if you are moved to give thanks, please thank the Lord.

The same is true about any piece of good service you or I or anyone does for Jesus. “What do you have that you did not first receive?” (Pause) Nothing. Nothing. All we have comes from the Lord.

Back to verse 1 – “Men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God, in other words stewards of the gospel. Servants and stewards.

A steward was someone who was responsible for providing what was necessary in a household. He was responsible to his master, who provided all things necessary, and responsible for the others in the household, distributing to them what they needed, as a steward.

And Paul wrote “It is required that those who have been given a trust – a steward - must prove faithful” (verse 2).

In particular, we have received the gospel, so it is our responsibility to pass it on. We are servants and stewards. It is not the only letter in which Paul describes the gospel “the secret things of God” - a secret. He does not mean that it was something always hidden and only known to a few, but that it had in the past been hidden and it was now revealed to the Gentiles, as well as to Jewish people. Servants and stewards.

Part two - Kings and paupers. Verse 8 – “Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings – and

that without us! I wish that you really had become kings so we might be kings with you”.

Paul saw the church at Corinth as a self-satisfied church. Satisfied with their gifts, satisfied with their wisdom, satisfied with their reserves in the bank, satisfied with their service, satisfied with their behaviour – Kings, the best that they could be.

In contrast they thought that Paul and his companions were poor relations. When a victorious general returned to Rome from battle in those days, his captives were placed “at the end of the procession like men condemned to die in the arena” (verse 9), as Paul wrote here, about himself and his companions.

“We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe. We are fools for Christ”. “We are weak ... We are dishonoured! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered we answer kindly.

Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.” (Verses 10-13).

Being an apostle was not an easy life. Paul had just enough to keep going but he was hungry and thirsty. He would love to have had a change of clothes, but his only clothes were rags. He had nowhere that he could call home. He had to work hard with his hands at tent-making to earn enough to live on. And at times he had been brutally treated, even stoned and left for dead on one occasion.

But Paul is telling them that those who preach the gospel must expect this - to be cursed, to be persecuted, to be slandered – and we must respond with blessing, with endurance, with kindness. A few weeks ago I received a rude email – not from someone in the church I hasten to add, but from someone outside it. As is my usual

practice with something annoying, I did not respond straight away. The next day God gave me kind words with which to respond.

So firstly Servants and stewards, secondly, Kings and paupers, and thirdly Fathers and children.

Now we have to be careful here. The Lord Jesus told his hearers “Do not call anyone on earth ‘father’ for you have one Father and he is in heaven” (Matthew 23.8). He was not telling them not to call their earthly fathers ‘Father’. But we are not to call those in church leadership ‘father’. This clear command of his is widely disregarded in some churches the world over.

But it was Paul who sometime earlier had taken the gospel to Corinth, and so he says here that he was not writing these words “to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. Even though you have 10,000 guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel” (verses 14 to 15).

“Therefore I urge you to imitate me”- (verse 16). As a father of children he was encouraging them to note his behaviour and to follow in his steps. They had no New Testament to read and to tell them what to do. So he told them “I urge you to imitate me”. He did not plan to visit them just then, but he was going to send Timothy to them “He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church (verse 17). He trusted Timothy to set an example which they should imitate.

We should indeed aim to live lives with conduct that should be good enough to be imitated by new Christians or by younger Christians.

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So Paul hoped that when he did come to see them he would not have to admonish anyone as a father may admonish his children. He

hoped that those who were now self-satisfied or arrogant would have discovered that “The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.” (Verse 20).

In other words it is not a matter of boasting but of overcoming temptation with the power of Christ.

We are going to learn more about boasting and power in the next sermon in the series in two weeks time.

