

Good morning.

You might like to keep your bibles open as I begin by setting the stage for the reading Brenda has just brought us from the confusingly named 1 Corinthians, because we know it wasn't the first letter Paul had written to them, but now Paul is writing to address areas of weakness in the church and among the believers, and to restore in them a true understanding of their faith.

He writes against a background of disunity, quarrels, the congregation elevating particular church leaders over others, and Paul reminds them, right at the start of his letter, of the grace of God which has been given to them in Christ Jesus. In v. 9 Paul tells his readers of God's faithfulness: '*God, who has called you into the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful*'.

Well, that was good news! The Corinthians were badly in need of knowing that, whatever their faults and weaknesses, God had called them and He would remain faithful. They had frankly got themselves into a bit of a pickle. Their priorities had become confused by the environment in which they lived. They were slipping back, drawn by the culture of their time and situation to adopt the world's standards. Their jealousies, dissension and pride had been brought to his attention and Paul, with his pastoral heart for these people, wanted to encourage them in their walk of faith, to instruct them and remind them that their priorities were different now from those in the world around them. Their calling was to follow in the way of the One he refers to in v. 30 as '*the **source** of their life in Christ Jesus*'.

As he begins the letter he's eager to bless the church by drawing them back to the essentials of their faith, now that they are '*in Christ*'. In his next letter he'll tell them 'the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here' but for now he centres his argument on the setting with which his listeners are familiar. That's

an important strategy (I dislike the term but I can't think of a better one in this context) in the ministry which each of us has. Beginning with our families, communities, friendship groups, neighbourhoods where we hold memories or environment or background or interests in common - is a great place to begin to share the good news of Jesus.

Paul is writing against a backdrop of a Greek culture in the urban, cosmopolitan setting of Corinth. One of the favourite pastimes in Greek society was to listen to professional travelling speakers who would dazzle their audiences with sparkling rhetoric. People would gather to admire their brilliance as they used their skills to persuade people toward a particular viewpoint. They didn't even necessarily personally espouse the viewpoints they were advocating, but they drew attention to themselves by delighting and moving their audiences by their clever use of words.

Now we understand that Paul was not a particularly gifted orator, (some scholars believe he had some kind of speech impediment) so this is probably not a very comfortable environment for him, but he has a message to deliver, and he is determined to share with others the truth of the sacrificial love of Jesus which has brought him into relationship with God and has transformed his own life.

You only have to think of the Olympic Games to know that the Greeks were a competitive lot, but Paul wasn't interested in competing with other preachers. Unlike the Greek orators, his purpose was not to draw people to him but rather to point them away from himself and to Christ Jesus.

The rhetoricians were looking to gain glory for themselves, but Paul was looking to gain glory for Jesus Christ. In today's world, self image (especially on social media) is HUGE. The internet has seen an exponential growth in opportunities for self promotion and it's

become a big part of many people's lives. The search for celebrity status, fame and popularity is considered perfectly normal. In a survey of millennials, 50% of young adults said that a major life goal was to become famous. I'm afraid I'm not really up on celebrity culture. I had a look at the names of the top 10 influencers on Instagram and I'd never heard of any of them but perhaps that says more about me than about them! It seems that often celebrity is considered an end in itself. You don't seem to need to have a particular gift or skill or to have achieved something remarkable. It's fame for fame's sake.

Who remembers this? (**Fame theme song**) Did you get the lyrics?: I'm gonna live forever; I'm gonna learn how to fly; I'm gonna make it to heaven. Baby, remember my name!

Madonna - possibly the most famous woman on the planet at one time - said 'I won't be happy until I'm as famous as God'. (Whatever happened to the humility upon which Jesus places such a high value? We only need to see His response to His disciples James and John vying for positions at the top table in the coming Kingdom to see what the value He places on service. ('whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all'. Mk 10.38). It's clear that leaders especially, but actually all those who follow Christ are called to humble service).

Last weekend I was at college in Salisbury where we're currently studying Church History and Doctrine. It just so happened that last Sunday morning we had an excellent lecture on the history of the Evangelical movement in the Church of England. I found it especially fascinating because of the importance in that movement of one particular mover and shaker. In the wake of the emergence of evangelicalism under John Wesley, his brother Charles, and George Whitefield in the mid to late 18th

century, one Charles Simeon comes to the fore with an extraordinary energy and passion for making the truth of God's word available and accessible to everybody. Now it was a heavy weekend with a lot of pretty dense teaching but even my weary ears pricked up at the mention of his name! Simeon was a hugely important figure in the development of the Evangelical movement, but for us I think he's of particular interest at this point in our history.

St Luke's is of course under the patronage of The Simeon Trust, incidentally along with many other churches in Bath, including Bath Abbey; St Stephens with Charlcombe; St Bart's; St Swithin's, Walcot; St Matthew with St Thomas a Becket, Widcombe; and Freshford with Limpley Stoke and Hinton Charterhouse. It's quite a list.

And it's a kind of cameo of the prolific nature of Charles Simeon's life and work. Now, to be fair, (unlike some of us!) he started young. When he was serving his curacy, he filled the church - something that was quite unheard of at the time, and he became vicar of Holy Trinity church in Cambridge at the age of 23. His ministry included Sunday afternoon tea parties for students, an evening service for servants (who couldn't get to the morning service as they were preparing lunch for the gentry), lectures to help people understand the Sunday teaching, home groups in the parish and beyond, and Sunday School classes for the poor. A few among many initiatives to reach people with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Simeon was a devoted follower of Jesus. He would get up at 4 a.m. to spend four hours in prayer and biblical study before starting his working day. His heart burned for the gospel and his ministry was wonderfully blessed. In 10 years, whilst serving as Vicar at the same church, he founded no less than 3 Missionary Societies, all of which, I believe, are still going today - 225 years later. The names Church Mission Society (CMS), the British and Foreign Bible Society

(Bible Society) and the Church's Mission among Jewish People (CMJ) may well be familiar to you. He was one of the Clapham Sect - active with William Wilberforce in the Abolition of Slavery Act and he was involved in Penal Reform.

Simeon was not universally popular to put it mildly! He had a reputation for being irascible, imperious, and eccentric. But, I suspect that, rather like Paul, being unpopular in some quarters didn't bother him. He was determinedly single minded in making Christ known in his communities, and those communities extended far and wide.

His initial appointment by the Bishop caused fury among the churchwardens who had petitioned him to install the previous incumbent's curate as vicar. When Simeon arrived, they promptly encouraged all the regular pew-holders to lock their pews and stay away from services in protest. Those who did choose to attend had to stand in the aisles, and, when Simeon installed benches at his own expense, the irate parish officials threw them out into the churchyard. This situation dragged on for several years. But in humble service of Christ, Simeon did all in his power to promote peace, and worked hard for reconciliation where there was division between groups within the Evangelical spectrum in the Church of England. His motto was 'humility, humility, humility'.

Despite being a controversial figure at some points in his life and ministry, his funeral in King's College Chapel was one of the most memorable ever held in Cambridge. The town council closed the shops, the university suspended all lectures, and a congregation of 800 filled the chapel. So ended a remarkable ministry of 54 years as Vicar of Holy Trinity, Cambridge.

Why am I banging on about him? Well it strikes me that we are very blessed to be under the patronage of the Simeon Trust; at this time of vacancy in particular when Stephen, Ian and others are looking

towards finalising the parish profile and advertising for an incumbent, all of us are involved to one degree or another in the process. Let us pray for a leader who, like Charles Simeon, has the gift of humility, loves the word of God and is filled with His Spirit; for someone with a pastor's love for the people under his care both in the church and in the parish as she or he shares the cure of souls with the Bishop; for someone with a missional heart who will follow in the footsteps of those who have preached the truth of the gospel here. There will be other desirable qualities and gifts that we'll be looking for in a new incumbent but these seem to be me to be some of the essentials.

I imagine the good people of Cambridge in Simeon's time, like the Greeks of Paul's time, placed a high value on eloquence, wisdom and discernment. All excellent attributes, but Paul is at pains to point out that all their wisdom is as foolishness before the wisdom of God; no amount of human wisdom, debate or rationalisation could bring them close to God.

For the Greeks, the idea that God's Son would come and die for the salvation of humanity was considered utter folly; they wanted the kind of wisdom they'd heard from the orators - they could engage with that, admire it, critique it, reason with it - not so the message of the cross.

For Jews the idea that the Messiah would come in weakness and be willing to sacrifice Himself, to be crucified like a common criminal helpless at the hands of the occupying forces and strong religious leaders, for the love of humankind was anathema. They did not recognise a 'weak God' who would submit to a state sponsored death penalty. A stumbling block indeed. But the truth nevertheless, and the power of God to those who are being saved.

Our reading today was meant to end at verse 25 but I asked Brenda to continue through to the end of the chapter because, I don't know about you, but I can really identify with those last few verses.

How many of us are wise by human standards, how many powerful, how many of noble birth?

I love the fact that *'God chose what is foolish in the world, what is weak in the world, what is low and despised in the world, things that are not'* - so that none of us might boast in the presence of God. Christ Jesus is our wisdom from God, our righteousness; the One who sanctifies and redeems us, so yes - as our reading ended *'let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'*

Let me end with some words from a sermon preached by Charles Simeon at Cambridge University in 1837:

Let us take care that we know Christ crucified--
Let us adopt the Apostle's determination for ourselves- to know nothing but Christ and him crucified.
Let us make manifest the wisdom of our determination by the holiness of our lives. Amen

Home Group Questions

You might begin by saying (or singing) this verse and chorus?

*To God be the glory, great things He has done!
So loved He the world that He gave us His Son,
Who yielded His life an atonement for sin,
And opened the life-gate that all may go in.
Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord,
Let the earth hear His voice!
Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!
Let the people rejoice!
O come to the Father through Jesus the Son
And give Him the glory, great things He has done!*

Please read the passage (1 Corinthians 1.17-31)

17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

19 For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

20 Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

22 Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

26 Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him. 30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 31 Therefore, as it is written: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."

- 1 What do you think Paul meant by his statement in v 17?
Do you consider that eloquent wisdom '*empties the cross of Christ of its power*'? Is there a place for it in the Church?
You might like to discuss preachers you have heard at St Luke's or beyond. Billy Graham? J I Packer? John Stott? Nicky Gumbel? Why do you think their ministries have been so effective?

- 2 What do you understand by the phrase which Paul so loves: '*in Christ Jesus*'? Is it something different from
 - a) believing in God;
 - b) being baptised;
 - c) accepting that the credal statements we make Sunday by Sunday are true?

- 3 What practical steps can we, as ministers of God's grace in Christ Jesus, take to point away from ourselves and towards Him?
What is there in our daily lives that demonstrates to those around us the value we place on the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross?

- 4 Charles Simeon, whose ministry was extraordinarily effective, saw a great need for the attribute of humility.
What are the three qualities you would most value in a new incumbent?

- 5 The Jews and the Greeks found the message of the cross incomprehensible (v.23). What can we do to help those who still misunderstand make sense of it today so that they, together with us, may 'boast in the Lord' (v.31)