

A Church Divided

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 31st of October 1999. The preacher is Warwick Grant.

His sermon is entitled, A Church Divided, and is from 1 Corinthians, chapter 3, verses 1 to 23. Well, one of the less known songs that was written by the Beatles, or perhaps it is fairly well known, is a song called, I Should Have Known Better. And in tonight's Bible reading, which is basically the whole of chapter 3 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he's basically saying to them just that. Look guys, you should know better than that. That's basically his message in a nutshell. You'll see what I mean shortly. I just want to put us in the picture a bit and just explain the context of this letter. So Paul has written two letters. He wrote a few letters, but there are two letters recorded for us in the Bible that were written by Paul to the church in a place called Corinth.

[1 : 13] That's why it's called the first letter to the Corinthians. You might be wondering where on earth is this joint called Corinth. And I'll show you with this map that will be on the overhead.

You'll see that Corinth was near the southernmost part of what is present-day Greece, not too far from Athens. And I think there are ruins of ancient Corinth there to be seen today. And this guy, Paul, who wrote this letter, made quite a few journeys around the Mediterranean Sea, and he was telling people about Jesus. And it was on the second journey that he made where he visited Corinth.

And he founded the church there. And I think he spent about 18 months in Corinth at that time. Well, another 18 months after he'd left Corinth, people in the church there began arguing. And divisions arose. And some people actually slipped back into an immoral lifestyle. So Paul wrote this letter to correct that situation.

[2 : 19] He'd heard the stuff that was going on in Corinth. And he wrote this letter to address some of these problems. He addressed a certain number of issues and wanted to clear up some confusion about what is right and what's wrong.

And we think that the time he wrote this letter, he was actually in Ephesus, which you can see on the map as well. So that might sort of put you in the picture of what's going on here, where Paul was, where he wrote the letter, who he was writing to, and the situation that he was writing to. Okay, well, we're looking at chapter 3. And I'd really encourage you to grab the Bibles, the black Bibles in the seats in front of you, because you'll get twice as much out if you can follow as we go through the Bible reading.

We're on page 927. Page 927, and it's chapter 3 of this letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians. Okay, well, as I mentioned before, Paul is basically saying, come on, guys, you should know better than to behave like that. What do I mean? Well, let's follow the first couple of verses.

[3 : 33] And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food.

Even now, you are still not ready. Those of you who are parents will know what it's like to have a new baby. And in terms of feeding, they don't even have teeth.

And so you've got to feed them stuff like this. Milk. Although apparently this milk is off, so I wouldn't give them this particular bottle of milk. But it looks the same, doesn't it?

So, yeah, I mean, you can't give them solid food. Their digestive systems just can't cope with it. You have to give them liquid food, whether the mother's milk or milk from a cow. That's where milk comes from.

Did you know that? I mean, they're just babies, aren't they? You can't expect a newborn baby to be given this with no teeth and just their gums and just to chump away on this.

[4 : 44] It's just not possible. It just can't happen. And even then, when you do give them milk, they just spew it up all over you anyway.

But they are babies and they're little infants. And what more can you expect of such a little creature? This is what Paul is saying in verses 1 and 2. He describes the Corinthian Christians when they first accepted and believed in Jesus as being infants in Christ.

He describes the basic Christian teaching as being like milk. Now, when you haven't been a Christian for long, and some of you here may be in that very situation, you've become a Christian, you've decided, yes, I'd like to follow Jesus, but you don't know a lot about what it is to follow him. Some of you may be Christians for many, many years. Some of you may be still making up your mind whether or not you'd like to believe and follow Jesus. But when you haven't been a Christian for long, you're not in a position to know deep theological concepts, the solid food of what it is to believe in Jesus.

So you might be taught the basics of the Christian faith. Who Jesus was, what he did, what he did for us on the cross, his forgiveness, his gifts to us, particularly eternal life.

[6 : 10] The problem with these Christians in Corinth was that they should have grown up by now, but they hadn't.

Paul says at the end of verse 2, even now you are still not ready. That is for the solid food. Let's listen to verse 3. The expression here, of the flesh, means that they're like the rest of the world, just following their own sinful desires.

The great thing about following God is that he can change the yucky parts of our lives. He can make us into the people that he means for us to really be.

The opposite of being of the flesh would be to be of the spirit. That is, guided, directed, and controlled, I suppose, governed by God's Holy Spirit to walk in God's ways.

It seems that these Christians in Corinth had put some of their leaders and teachers on a kind of a pedestal. Let's read on in verse 4 to 6. For when one says, I belong to Paul, and another, I belong to Apollos, are you not merely human?

[7 : 43] What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

It seems that some factions had developed in the church. People were following personalities, and they were following a certain particular teacher in the church, and forgetting that it's actually God that we follow.

Paul mentions himself as one of the teachers, and a guy called Apollos, and both had taught the Christian faith in Corinth to the Christians there. It's a bit like us in this church going around saying things like, well, I follow Phil and his teaching.

Now, Phil's our assistant minister who is in here tonight. And others saying, well, I'm a big fan of Paul Barker, and he's our vicar, and he's here tonight.

And the remaining two people saying, well, I quite like Warwick. And, and the excellent standard of teaching that he imparts to us when we have those rare occasions that he preaches.

[8 : 58] Well, we see in verse 5 to 7 that Paul draws a comparison with gardening. Let's listen from verse 5. What then is Apollos?

What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. Well, Paul had founded and begun the church in Corinth.

And this guy, Apollos, had helped the Christians there learn more about their faith. But who is it that actually enables us to grow in our faith?

It's God. And it's God alone. Now, my dad is a really keen gardener.

[9 : 53] Not only is he keen, he's very competent. I'm not just saying that because he's my dad, but he's had training in horticulture and he looked after gardens for the whole of the Shire of Eltham before it became the Shire of Nillimbik.

And when people visit his garden, they're often impressed with the things that he's got growing. And they'll say things to him like, how did you grow that? And dad always says, I didn't.

God did. God did the growing. Paul says the same thing in verse 7. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

like this plant here. It was planted by someone. It was nurtured by someone. But it was God who made the plant grow.

The same for us with our Christian faith. Those who teach others about the faith don't make them grow. It is God that does that. But of course, God uses their efforts, doesn't he?

[10:59] So Paul and Apollos aren't rivals at all, which is the way they were being perceived. In fact, they're co-workers laboring for the very same cause.

In verses 8 and 9, we go on. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each.

For we are God's servants working together. You are God's field, God's building. It's interesting, in verse 8, we're actually told that there will be a wage for our labor, a reward for our labor, perhaps. God will reward us for stuff that we do for him. And in verse 9, we have this wonderful expression. For we are God's servants working together.

Perhaps a better translation of the original Greek, which is what the New Testament was written in, is, for we are God's fellow workers. I think that's an unreal thing, that God actually says, look, could you guys help me with this mission in the world that I have of telling people about my love?

[12:17] God not only makes us, not only does he die for us in his son Jesus to take the punishment for our sins, not only does he offer us eternal life with him in heaven forever, but he wants us to be on his side, working with him, going out into the world, telling people about his love.

God didn't have to do that, you know. God doesn't need us. God is God. He can communicate his love to people in whatever way he so chooses. I mean, if you were God and you wanted to tell the whole world that you loved it and wanted to be reconciled to it, you wouldn't choose human beings to do that as your most efficient method of communicating the good news.

God can do what he wants. He could use much more efficient methods to do that. God sometimes does communicate directly to people. Many examples in the Bible of that through dreams.

He even spoke to a guy through a donkey in the Old Testament. God can do anything to communicate to people. But what he chooses to do in his love and grace is to actually involve us in that whole process.

He says he loves us so much he wants us to be his fellow workers. We're not working for him but with him in communicating his love to the world. That's a fantastic thing, you know.

[13:39] When you do anything for God, he is right there alongside you working with you. You and God are partners together. You're not on your own.

I think that's great. Let's go on to verse 10 and 11. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder, I laid a foundation and someone else is building on it.

Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid. That foundation is Jesus Christ.

Well, Paul here acknowledges that it's only God who's enabled him to be the one who laid the foundation and that others like this guy, Apollos, is now building on.

And verse 10 reminds us that we need to be really careful as we seek to build up God's church.

Verse 11 reminds us that there is only one foundation that can be laid anyway, and that's Jesus Christ himself.

[14:52] I don't seek to judge other churches, but I do wonder, are there other churches who have perhaps forgotten what their foundation is? Do we sometimes forget what our foundation is here at Holy Trinity?

We need to remember that it's Jesus Christ who is always our foundation for everything we do. It is only because of Jesus that we exist as a church.

Churches sometimes forget to tell people about Jesus. Sometimes you go to church services and Jesus is hardly ever mentioned. They forget to tell people about the death of Jesus, his resurrection for them, his offering of forgiveness and eternal life.

I grew up in a church like that. The church I grew up in has very little to do with the fact now that I'm a Christian. I remember going back to the church of my childhood as an adult, perhaps about five years ago, and talking with one of the young adults there.

And I remember this person as a young teenager, and we got talking about some aspects of the Christian faith. I remember asking this girl, I said, Philippa, why do you go to church?

[16:06] And she had no idea why she went to church. It was a habit. She'd gone to church every week, probably for the last 15, 20 years. It was just a habit, a meaningless weekly ritual.

I think that's really, really sad. And from the context of the conversation, believe me, she really didn't know why she went to church. It wasn't that I didn't quite understand her. She really had no idea why she was there.

And I believe this is because this church didn't have Jesus as its foundation. Its foundation was of other things of less importance. A strong tradition of beautiful choral music, perhaps, or great liturgy.

They're important things as we seek to worship God, but they're not foundational. The foundation for all we do must be Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection for us.

Well, Paul now goes on to speak in verses 12 to 15 of God's judgment of what we build on that foundation of Jesus. Now, if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, the work of each builder will become visible, for the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done.

[17 : 35] If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss.

The builder will be saved, but only as true fire. Will Christian people seek to serve God with all their heart. Of course, that's what it is to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ.

And sometimes we build on this foundation of Jesus that I've just been talking about with all our heart, and we seek to do great things for God. Other times, our work for God is shoddy, of poor quality, and not very good.

Paul is reminding us here that everything we do for God will be tested, or if you like, judged. God's going to judge this sermon I'm preaching tonight.

He's going to judge everything that I do for him. The same for you. We need to be sure that we try and do the best we can for God.

[18 : 38] We need to strive to excel in the things we do for God. Paul uses the image of a building, and the foundation of which is Jesus Christ himself, as we've already talked about.

I wonder what sort of work that you build on the foundation of Jesus. Are you building at all? Do you do anything for God? Do you talk to him?

I'm not saying you've got to go out and evangelize the whole world, but maybe you do need to be challenged. I need to be challenged, we all need to be challenged, to perhaps be doing some building for God, using our gifts for him.

Paul says that we can offer our best, the analogy being that we can build with stuff like gold, or silver, or precious stones, the really best things we can offer God.

Or we can build with things of no importance at all, wood, or hay, or straw, stuff that doesn't last and is easily destroyed. This is analogous to doing things in a shoddy way for God.

[19 : 47] Well, it says in verse 13, The work of each builder will become visible, for the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done.

day. What's this day that's spoken of? Day with a capital D. What's this day? Well, this is the day of judgment, the day when we will all have to face Jesus and give an account of our lives.

Now, that could be when we die and we stand before Jesus, or it could be when Jesus returns in glory to rid the world of sin and suffering and to set up his kingdom and all the implications that that has.

Well, in verse 13, Paul uses the example of fire. Now, like most kids, I was fascinated with fire. I was so fascinated with fire, I nearly burnt my father's shed down.

But, I always noticed that in a fireplace or a campfire, if you put bits of wood in there, like old bits of fencing that had nails in it, in the morning when you came and the fire had burned out and it was cold, the nails were still there, they'd always survived, of course.

[21 : 05] The wood had just gone, but the nails and screws and bolts and things like were all there. God's judgment is like a consuming fire. A fire just burns things up like straw and wood and hay, but valuable and substantial things like gold and silver and precious stones would survive such a fire.

God's God's judgment will mean that the laborer will be rewarded for his work. Those things have lasted and endured the test of God's judgment.

Yes, God rewards those who do good things for him. Isn't that great? God wants to reward us for the things we do for him. But if our work for God is shoddy and half hearted and of poor quality, it will be burnt up in the fire of God's judgment and there will be no reward.

Now, please note that this is not saying that this Christian person ends up in an eternity separated from God. This is not talking about being sent away from God's presence forever.

The judgment here is not of the person, but it's of the work they did for God. We need to hear Jesus' words from John chapter 5 to remind us of what Jesus said about those who are Christians who do trust in Jesus.

[22 : 35] Listen to what Jesus said. Very truly I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and does not come under judgment but has passed from death to life.

So if you're a Christian person who says, yes Jesus, I want to follow you, I accept the fact that you died on the cross for me, you offer me your forgiveness, your gift of eternal life, I accept that and I seek to serve you with all my heart.

You will not be judged by God when you die. You will pass straight, you've already received eternal life. But what you have done for God will be judged. it's sort of a different judgment.

Your salvation is secure but God is going to judge all of us for what we do for him. We may probably see, we may probably, we probably will see some of our work burnt up in God's judgment.

While for other things that will last and endure, God will be glad to reward us for the things we have done. So please understand the distinction of God's judging of us as people.

[23 : 48] We trust in Jesus, we don't need to be fearful of that because we ourselves will not be judged. But the work we do for God will be judged. And some of it may burn up, but we will not be harmed.

It says here that there's the expression as through fire at the end of verse 15. The builder will be saved but only as through fire. It's the picture here of a man running out of a burning house with only his life.

The house is behind him just destroyed, burnt up, but he himself is saved wearing only the clothes he's standing up in. That's the picture here. The person will be saved although their house has been destroyed.

Let's read on in verse 16 and 17. Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person.

For God's temple is holy and you are that temple. Paul is sometimes or in another place in this same letter refers to our human bodies that God has given us as being the temple of the Holy Spirit or God's temple.

[25 : 05] He's not referring to us and our bodies, our physical bodies in this context. He's actually referring to the church, in this case the church in Corinth. Now God's spirit, his Holy Spirit lives in his temple, in his church.

God lives in his church here at Holy Trinity by his spirit. So this is God's temple, not the building but the people who make up God's church.

We are his temple. There is a strong warning here to those who would seek to destroy and damage God's temple. It says here in verse 17, if anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person.

For God's temple is holy and you are that temple. It's a bit like us when we're little kids and someone comes over to play with us and they end up wrecking one of our toys.

I don't know if that's been your experience but I've been livid when that's happened to me. I think this is my toy out of the goodness of my heart I offer to let this person play with it and they've just totally wrecked it and I'm angry.

[26 : 15] Well I've grown out of that sort of thing now but I used to be like that and this is sort of a picture of God. He doesn't want his church that he sent his son to die for to be damaged or destroyed or harmed.

He cares about us with an incredible loving jealousy if you like. He doesn't want his church to be damaged. So we need to be careful about what we say about God's church.

We need to build it up and not tear it down. The church is not a perfect place. It's full of sinful people but we're together knowing God's forgiveness and love.

Let's seek to build each other up and God's church as well. We're on the home straight with the reading and let's read verses 18 to 20. Do not deceive yourselves.

If you think that you are wise in this age you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.

[27 : 13] For it is written he catches the wise in their craftiness. And again the Lord knows the thoughts of the wise that they are futile.

This was a topic of God's wisdom that was raised in the last chapter. Let's look at verse 19 again. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.

There are a lot of very very clever and knowledgeable and wise people in our world. People in positions of leadership. But all of their wisdom, all of our human wisdom, is folly and foolishness to God.

God turns wisdom and foolishness on their heads. you would think that a guy hanging on a cross dying would be a defeated person. But his son Jesus was that person and he was the greatest victor in all of human history.

He defeated death, he defeated sin and he is the king of the universe. What utter foolishness this cross is with Jesus hanging on it to us in our human minds.

[28 : 21] And yet for God this Jesus on the cross is great wisdom. And our final three verses, verse 21. So let no one boast about human leaders, for all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future.

All belong to you and you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God. Paul. We remember from earlier in the reading where people had said that they followed a certain teacher.

Some said I follow Paul and others said I follow Apollos. And there were all these factions in the church and people were sort of giving themselves over to a different church leader and teacher saying I'm one of their disciples and I'm going to follow them.

Paul is saying look that's just ridiculous, that's nonsense. he's saying here you don't belong to them, they are actually God's gift to you. So in this church I suppose we would say that those that teach us the scriptures and those of us that do that are very privileged to do that are God's gift to the church here.

If I can say that without sounding arrogant. So they don't belong to the teachers but the teachers are God's gift to them. And Paul makes this list of other things that belong to us.

[29 : 52] Our lives indeed are from God. It says death is ours, death belongs to us. Talk about that in a second. And we belong to Jesus and Jesus belongs to God.

Why should death belong to us? Well, let me illustrate that with an example. On Tuesday I teach religious education at a local primary school.

And just last Tuesday this girl in grade four, a lovely girl, I'll call her Kathy, she's about 10 years old, came up to me at the end of the class. We hadn't even been talking about death but she came up to me.

I could tell she was about to burst into tears. Her bottom lip was trembling and she said, Warwick, I'm scared of dying. And I just wanted to hug her and comfort her but I knew that would have been totally inappropriate.

So I just said, the bell's about to go Kathy, can I catch up with you in a second? And so at the opportunity I explained to her that if you trust in Jesus and give yourself over to him and accept what he's done for you, and we talked about this during the year, that you can know for sure that you will be in heaven with God forever.

[31 : 05] And that's the greatest thing anyone could ever know. And in the brief moment that we had, I hope she received some comfort. But we need to understand that we don't belong to death.

Death hasn't captured us in its grasp. But death belongs to us. We share the victory that Jesus has given us in dying and rising for us as we remember that first Easter time.

Jesus defeated death. He stamped his feet all over it. It's finished. Death belongs to us. We have captured it. And the Christian person is completely victorious over death.

assured of God's forgiveness. The fact that when they die they will be in heaven with God forever. Death is ours. Death belongs to us. We don't belong to it.

So, there's a lot of great stuff in this reading to help us personally in our faith, to help us as a church to grow in faith. Let's just review it and how we can apply some of these things in our lives very briefly.

[32 : 10] We need to grow and behave as Christians. We shouldn't be content to remain as baby Christians just doing the same things we've always done. We need to strive to seek to serve God better.

We need to be encouraged by the fact that we can work with God. We are God's fellow workers in all the things that we seek to do with him. We need to remember that our work for him will be judged and some of it may not survive that judgment.

That's an incentive to do the best we can for God. The church is God's temple. We need to seek to build it up and not destroy or harm it. Otherwise we will incur God's wrath.

We need to know God's wisdom, not human wisdom. And we need to not be partisan following certain teachers but thanking God for the Bible teachers that he has given us.

Let's pray as we seek to apply these things in our lives for God. Lord God we just want to thank you for your servant Paul the apostle who originally wrote this letter to your people in a place called Corinth many many years ago.

[33 : 20] Thank you that in your provision this letter has been preserved for us and you speak to us today through it. Lord we thank you for the warnings it gives us, for the challenges it gives us and for the encouragement it gives us.

We pray Lord that you would help us to grow in our faith of you, to be excellent servants for you and Lord we can be encouraged by the fact that you are always with us. Thanks God that you love us heaps and heaps in Jesus name.

Amen.