

1 Corinthians 3.1-23

Building carefully

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 10 October 2021

1 Corinthians: Seeing the Son [4]

The story so far...

So far in 1 Corinthians we have looked at the message of the cross – that Jesus died to bring forgiveness and new life to all who repent and believe. We've seen how God is making a new family – the Church – changing and transforming us by the Spirit.

The message of the cross tells us how we *join* God's new family; the Spirit helps us grow up and mature *in* that family.

Part of that means teaching us new values – often the opposite of the world's values – and this is where the Corinthians were struggling. They praised and focussed on the wrong things – human wisdom, rhetorical skill and competence – whereas God builds his people through weakness, sacrifice, and self-giving, **so that no-one may boast** (1.29).

Paul had told them off a bit in chapter 1 – but here he gets serious.

Babies (1-4)

What is the difference between a mother-in-law and giving birth? One is terribly painful and almost unbearable... while the other is just having a baby.

Politicians are like nappies... in an ideal world they should be changed frequently, and for the same reason.

Paul is pretty rude here. The NIV puts it like this (verse 1):

Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly – mere infants in Christ.

1 Corinthians 3.1 (NIV)

You see for Paul, living **by the Spirit** is part of the definition of what it means to be a Christian – so he is saying, ‘I couldn’t talk to you as Christians but only as *babies*.’ The Greek word is *nepiois* – from which we get the word ‘nappy’!

You are so immature, Paul says, you aren’t even potty-trained yet.

Ouch.

But Paul has a point. Look at his evidence (verse 3): they are **worldly**, full of **jealousy**, **quarrelling**, cliques, and in-fighting (4). It sounds pretty infantile to me.

The irony is that the Corinthians thought they were fully-grown, mature, adult Christians – while behaving like babies. How easy it is for us to deceive ourselves about what we are really like! The problem is always *other people*.

We have seen this over the past couple of weeks as people have been interviewed on petrol forecourts. Of course, *they* had a valid reason for buying fuel before they needed it – one I saw had more than three-quarters of her tank left – the problem was *everyone else* panic buying fuel.

A sign of maturity is seeing things – including yourself – as they really are, *so you can do something about it*.

Do not deceive yourselves (18), Paul says to them; he wanted the Corinthians to see how they were behaving like babies, *so they could grow up*. This is why he was being so firm: **I gave you milk**, he said (2), **not solid food, for you were not ready for it**.

Now, believe it or not, there are a *lot* of milk-related jokes on the web. Are you sitting comfortably?

Why did the cow jump over the moon? Because the farmer had cold hands.

What's the fastest liquid on the planet? Milk, because before you see it, it's pasteurised.

How does Reese eat her cereal and milk? Witherspoon.

What does the invisible man drink? Evaporated milk.

That's quite enough of that.

But what does Paul mean? What's the **milk**, and what's the **solid food** that the Corinthians **were not ready for**? He seems to be referring to his teaching – so the most natural meaning is:

- the **milk** is the gospel, the message of the cross, Jesus died and risen for us – joining God's new family;
- the **solid food** is the ongoing work of the Spirit helping us grow as disciples – living as part of God's new family.

Some people don't like the suggestion that the gospel is 'mere' **milk** – but I don't see the problem. Babies need **milk** to survive because they can't digest **solid food** yet. Children keep drinking **milk** as they grow so their bones are healthy and strong. I still have a glass of **milk** in the morning – as *part* of a healthy diet. **Milk** is good! But to grow, we also need to eat **solid food**.

I could stand up here every week and say that Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins, and rose so we might have new life. To be honest, most weeks I will say something like that (!), because we need to keep being reminded of gospel truth. It's like having a glass of **milk** every morning at breakfast.

But in the same way that we eat **solid food** in the rest of our day, Christians also need the rest of what the Bible teaches about *how* we live out the life God gives us in Jesus, *how* we grow up in God's family, *how* we become the people we already are in Jesus.

Builders (5-15)

Paul's metaphors come thick and fast in this chapter – we start with babies, and now we move on to farmers and builders.

¶ This is an Imperial Star Destroyer, from *Star Wars*. Except there's a twist – the eagle-eyed among you will notice that it's actually built out of LEGO bricks – 4,784 of them to be precise. It is 66cm wide (that's 26 inches) and over 110cm (43 inches) long. But just imagine the hours of fun building it! ¶ The Millennium Falcon model has even more pieces in it – over 7,500 of them! Both can be yours for the princely sum of £649... I think they'd look great in my office at home...

I love to build things. For years all I would get for my birthday and Christmas presents was more LEGO – I had tool trays and drawers that I used to store my pieces in, so I could build whatever I wanted. I loved it!

That's probably one reason why I am tempted to skip over the bit in this chapter about gardening – which I'm useless at – and go straight for the bit about building. Sometimes it's tempting to do that with the Bible – to skip the bits we don't understand or don't like or which don't really speak to us. But that's not good...

Verse 6: **I planted the seed**, Paul says, **Apollos watered it** – and then he drops the vital truth – *but God has been making it grow* (6). And he carries on:

So neither the one who plants nor the one waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

1 Corinthians 3.7 (NIV)

The Corinthians were obsessed with their human leaders. We saw this in chapter 1 – and Paul returns to that theme here, which shows how big a problem it was. The church was divided by who they thought was the most impressive preacher, with the cleverest teaching, or simply the one they liked the best!

But as Paul says human leaders are **only servants** doing the **task** God **has assigned** them (5). It's important they do their tasks – after all, although I'm no expert, I'm fairly sure there's no point watering soil without planting any seeds, and there's no point planting seeds if no-one is going to water them.

So church leaders are not irrelevant – which is good to know! – we each need to play our part. But, our human leaders are simply insignificant compared to God. Verse 9:

We are fellow workers in **God's** service; you are **God's** field, **God's** building.

1 Corinthians 3.9 (NIV)

What matters most is the one we serve, the one to whom we belong: God. Stop focusing and fretting about human leaders, Paul says, and put your confidence in God! Whether you prefer buildings or fields the key point is this: we belong to God.

You know, not all building work is equally enjoyable. For instance, drilling a large hole is boring, but fastening two pieces of metal together is riveting.

Many of you at Christ Church know far more than me about what it takes to construct a building.

I'm going to go out on a limb here, but I reckon that a couple of metres below us, are some foundations, made of something solid and level. Am I right? (Said the preacher, hoping the answer wouldn't ruin his sermon illustration...!) Paul said:

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder [*some translations say: skilled master builder, which I prefer*]... no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 3.10-11 (NIV)

Incidentally, this is why I think the milk in verse 2 is the gospel, the foundational teaching and truth about Jesus: because like milk, foundations are crucial – but both are only the beginning.

In his own teaching (Matthew 7.24-27), Jesus gave the example of **a wise man who built his house on the rock**. Although *sing* 'the rains came down and the floods came up,' his house **did not fall** – why? – **because it had its foundation on the rock**.

But **the foolish man who built his house on sand** – when the rain came, 'his house came tumbling down'... it **fell with a great crash**.

What makes **a wise builder**? Jesus gives the answer: **'Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice.'**

That, I think, is the point Paul is making. The Corinthians were obsessed with human wisdom, which is like building on sand. Forget that, Paul says: **Jesus has become for us wisdom from God** (1.30). He is the **foundation** we must build on (11).

So if that's the foundation – what about the bricks? What do we build with? Paul says we must build using **gold, silver, costly stones** (12) – why? – so that what we build together **survives** (14).

Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but this building is made of breeze blocks and RSJs, not gold, silver, and costly stones. Apart from being expensive, precious metals and gems are bad building materials because they are soft and brittle.

So what does Paul mean? The Old Testament helps us out:

Psalm 12.6: **The words of the Lord are flawless, like silver purified in a crucible, like gold refined seven times.**

Psalm 119.72: **The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.**

Proverbs 8.11: **Wisdom is more precious than rubies.**

It turns out Paul means what Jesus meant in his parable: the bricks are God's precious words which we need to hear; building with them means putting them into practice, which is costly.

That's what it means to **build with care** (10).

What's the most logical building in the USA? The United States Mint... if you think about it, it makes a lot of cents.

Sadly some churches shift their foundation so it isn't Jesus any more. But what's far more common is building with **wood, hay or straw** (12). That happens when we do good things, being kind or generous or compassionate, but shy away from Scripture, rarely talking about Jesus, ignoring what people *actually* need which is for someone to deal with their sin and shame.

Christians and even churches can be well-meaning and busy with good things, but like the Corinthians be deceived and build with the wrong materials. Friends, I don't want that to be us. I want us to build the right building with the right materials on the right foundation. That will mean asking some difficult questions – but it also means that whatever we build will survive – and we **will receive a reward** (14) – the joy of seeing something we helped build in God's kingdom (see 1 Thessalonians 2.19-20).

I want to finish with that challenge and encouragement: to make sure we build carefully, so that what we build survives.

Temple (16-23)

But I can't ignore the end of this chapter. Paul uses yet another metaphor to describe *what* we are building: a **temple, God's temple** (16). Notice we are not building individual temples but a temple: **you together are that temple**, Paul says (17).

The church is a new family, and it is also a new **temple**, in which **God's Spirit lives** (16). The church is not (supposed to be) a museum but living and growing, full of God's energy and life-giving Spirit. We pray 'Come Holy Spirit' not because he isn't here but because he is and we are thirsty for more! What that looks like in practice - well, that comes later in 1 Corinthians.

For now, Paul's point is that the church is sacred, that God takes it seriously - and for all my silly jokes, so do I. We aren't messing around: this is life and death, it matters that we build carefully, with the right materials, on the right foundation.

God takes it seriously, and the warning is serious too: God **will destroy** anyone who **destroys** his **temple** (17). Paul uses the same word: God will treat us as we treat the church. It might sound harsh, but remember who wrote it: Paul, who himself tried to destroy the church - but he repented and received forgiveness.

Paul's warning is stark, but so is his encouragement that it's not all down to us: for ultimately **God is the one who makes things grow** (7). Forget **the wisdom of this world** – it might sound good but ultimately it is foolish (19) and **futile** (20).

No: God has given us everything, all we need in Jesus (21-22), so let's – together – continue in all God gives us, make the most of it, build carefully with it, and one day share in his joy, the joy of our true master builder.