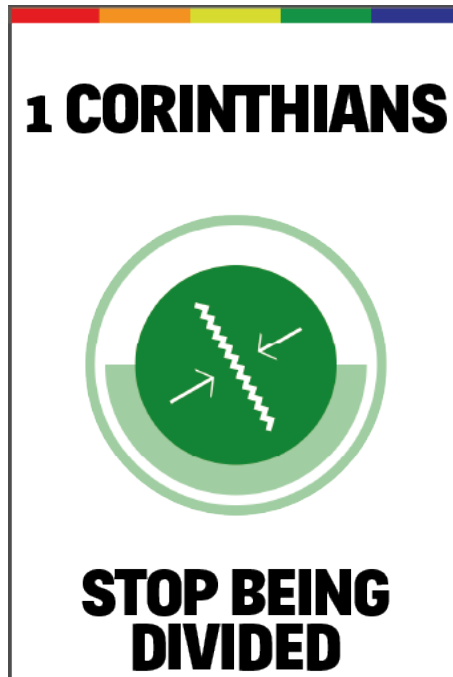




BIBLE IN A YEAR 2020



Summary

This letter from the apostle Paul was written to a church which clearly had problems. The divisions among people meant that their lives, standards, goals and dreams were diverging. It was not just hard for them to get on with each other, but for anyone to see God at work through them.

However, Paul brought good news that God could fix this and would, in fact, use this church to demonstrate the all-important power of God's love.

This letter must have been a painful rebuke for the church, but it contains some of the most empowering, memorable and widely quoted descriptions of love, healthy life with God and the spiritual gifts God provides to heal and work through bodies of people.

Bern Leckie

Saturday May 30: 1 Corinthians: 1-4

A proud and squabbling church...and the Beautiful Letdown!

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Chris Simmonds:

What did I like about today's reading?

Ah, the Corinthians!

I love the raw messy humanity of this letter. I think, if it weren't for letters like those Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, we could be forgiven for sort of idolising the early church, putting them on a pedestal of holiness unsurpassed ever since. I'm sure many a church leader has observed the petty squabbling and egoic power-plays of their congregants down through the centuries and been consoled by these letters. Where there are people, there will be problems!

In these initial chapters of this first letter, Paul frankly scolds this community for behaving like spiritual children. I love how Paul cuts through to what underpins the church's divisions over who it is they follow – their in-fighting smacks of a pub debate over whose football team is best..! What I love most about these chapters is how, as a means of rebuking this behaviour, Paul lays out a wonderful description of God's upside-down Kingdom dynamic – God takes the weak and foolish to shame the 'strong' and 'wise'. Those who are humble and aware of their limitations are spiritually open to hearing God's voice and receiving his true wisdom – ultimately exemplified in a crucified Messiah. Those who want to lead must do so by serving, by laying their lives down.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

These chapters draw us once again into the very heart of who God is. Jesus revealed a God of love who gives, and gives and gives. A God who reveals how tender, kind, sacrificial 'weakness' is greater than any army, any 'sign', any eloquence or other apparent show of strength. As I read in a shop window in Stokes Croft yesterday – 'kindness is power'.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

For the past few months I've been playing RISK on my phone – fairly compulsively if I'm honest. Anyone who knows me will know I'm *occasionally* a bit competitive (!) but it did occur to me recently that rather than jumping straight back on for a new match ('to show them all!') I should just sit there, bask in the heat of defeat, and grin to myself as my ego dies a small death.

I wonder if there are repetitive situations for each of us where we could develop a habit around letting our ego die a small death – 'dying daily'. Possibly better ones than my silly example – maybe we put others before ourselves, not take the credit we feel is due to us, etc. Let's have a think for a moment about which situations often trigger immature reactions in us and plan ahead 😊

Who am I going to share this with?

I'm going to listen to the following song with my kids (one of my faves from my '20s!) which powerfully explores this 'weakness is strength' dynamic.

[I love discussing song lyrics with my kids by the way, helps me and them get so much more from the song! Maybe this is something you could try with family / friends?]

*"It was a beautiful letdown
When I crashed and burned
When I found myself alone, unknown and hurt
It was a beautiful letdown
The day I knew,
That all the riches
This world had to offer me will never do....*

*I'll be a beautiful letdown
That's what I'll forever be
And though it may cost my soul
I'll sing for free....*

*We are a beautiful letdown
Painfully uncool
The church of the dropouts
The losers, the sinners,
The failures, and the fools
What a beautiful letdown
Are we salt in the wound
Hey, let us sing one true tune"*

Switchfoot, The Beautiful Letdown

Wednesday June 3: 1 Corinthians: 5-7

Sex matters!

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Chris Simmonds:

What did I like about today's reading?

So here we have some of the more hotly debated chapters of our time. Paul's very specific and directive advice seems to fly in the face of many of the sexual norms of our liberated, 'sex positive' culture. This section of Paul's letter first addresses a specific issue (a man sleeping with his step-mum). It goes on to unpack general sexual moral guidance and then advice for those who are married and single.

I think what I love most about these chapters is that there are no taboos with Paul. Much maligned as he is for speaking his mind so forthrightly, at least he tackles issues head-on.

I think we go wrong when we take Paul's - or any other biblical writer's - words at face value, applying them without any thought for the very specific social and historic context they were addressing. Paul was certainly not wanting to write new 'law' - given the pains he clearly took to uproot the old law of the Jewish people.

But that being said, he does clearly think sex matters. A lot. Which I also love. Sex for Paul is not just a necessary means of procreation or fleeting fun. Rather he clearly sees it as powerful, and deeply spiritual. Indeed, is not such a perspective - which sees sex as unparalleled in its power both to deeply unite and irrevocably tear apart, to bring life, or death - is not such a perspective profoundly 'sex positive'? Sex is certainly not a dirty word for Paul, but equally, it is not a trivial word.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

These chapters show me that sex matters to God. He cares that we get this right. Trinity is relationship. The three persons of the Godhead continually giving of themselves each to the other, selflessly and freely. There is something sacred when two people come together in mutual vulnerability and trust, each giving themselves for the other in love. This is no fire to be toyed with, and yet is something we should hold up, honour, celebrate and TALK ABOUT. The frankness of this passage - not to mention the rest of the bible - runs counter to our oh-so-British modesty and prudish dodging of sensitive issues.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

Let's follow Paul's example. While we don't carry the authority or clout Paul had, and while there is probably room for a little ~~let~~ more pastoral sensitivity, let's also not sweep things under the carpet when we see people hurting themselves or others with their misuse of sex. Let's call it out, privately and with deep grace and love, and talk about it.

Who am I going to share this with?

Probably not my kids. Not yet at least...

Saturday June 6: 1 Corinthians: 8-10

Sin and Subjectivity – agreeing to disagree

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Chris Simmonds:

What did I like about today's reading?

Here once again Paul seems to be addressing some very specific issues, perhaps raised in a letter to which he is responding. We might question what on earth the morality of eating or abstaining from food sacrificed to idols can possibly have to do with day-to-day life in 21st century Bristol..?!

As with so much of scripture however, it is for us to do some work to get to the heart of the principles laid out as well as some creative / sanctified interpretation about how we might apply these to our lives.

There will for instance be vegans and vegetarians in our community who cannot compute how eating the flesh of other creatures could be acceptable to God. For them, perhaps, to do so would be sinful as they would be betraying their inner convictions about what it means to live in harmony with God's creation. There may be those for whom smoking, or drinking, are complete no-nos for a child of God whose body is a sacred gift. We may well have people with strong environmental convictions for whom boarding a plane would be sinful as they could not in good conscience do so without feeling they are betraying a God who has commissioned us to responsibly steward this planet.

Paul - here as well as in so many of his letters – firstly emphasises the redundancy of the Mosaic law due to our freedom bought by Christ. We are united not by a code of 'correct' behaviour, but rather by a Spirit of love. What I love is that he then goes to great pains to stress that this same Spirit of love compels us to take great care about how we behave, how we express our views and respond to those held by the person before us. We don't necessarily have to behave the same, but we do need to behave lovingly.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

Again, our triune God is relationship - is, if you like, a unified family of persons. We are here referred to as Christ's body. The visible expression of his abundant life on planet Earth. A God who exists in eternal harmonious self-giving relationship must surely have the same heart for his 'imagers'. Surely the Divine longing is for a deep, real and vibrant community that emerges as we sensitively and lovingly express opposing convictions, respecting while not needing to agree. A diverse family united by an inner bond of love. Can we learn to agree to disagree?

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I am going to try to be less obnoxious about my opinions, however 'right' I think they are, and more sensitive and curious about the – often more quietly and respectfully – held views of the person in front of me.

Who am I going to share this with?

As many people as possible – but I'll aim to share by example, by living this out – not just articulating the ideal.

Wednesday June 17: 1 Corinthians: 11-13

All you need is love!

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Chris Simmonds:

What did I like about today's reading?

In today's reading we really arrive at the crux of Paul's central theme throughout this letter – 'now let me show you a way of life that is best of all...' And so follows probably one of the most quoted passages of scripture of all (at least at weddings). And for good reason.

Paul's masterful and timeless description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 is arguably unparalleled throughout all human literature – and yes, in the inimitable words of Lloyd Christmas – "I like it a lot". It throbs with Divine light and inspiration.

Probably less quoted at weddings will be his more time- / culture-bound instructions regarding the wearing of head coverings during worship at the start of our reading! Any men with long hair or women with short hair among us will probably be forgiven for smirking during such passages. Paul goes on in Ch. 12 to list various spiritual gifts which appear to have been distributed across the members of the church. This is followed by a lengthy metaphor in which he likens the church to a human body, the parts of which are necessarily diverse – each with their own critical function without which the whole would suffer.

The point – again - with all of this, is that Paul is driving for a vital harmony which embraces diversity. While it appears he falls into the trap of obliging the community to all accept certain external customs - with the whole head covering thing (and perhaps he does?) - his point is that they work together to arrive at a place of shalom. He celebrates the spread of giftings and abilities in the church and points out the absurdity of envy and pride – the foot should not strive to be a hand, and the head should not dismiss the importance of the feet. I love that time and again for Paul, while private spirituality is of course crucial, it means nothing if it is not worked out in community as this is its purpose. God does not want a collection of isolated balls of holiness. He wants a gang of goodness-spreaders.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

I love that Jesus' ultimate example of sacrificial love – the surrender of his beautiful life for the rescue of a broken world – finds its place again in today's reading. It cannot be said too strongly or too often – here is our standard and exemplar. Love trumps every spiritual gift or indeed any other ambition we could pursue in this life. Love is the Way of Christ.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

Severn Vineyard has gone from 50% to 90% in community group attendance during this pandemic. Let's take this opportunity to be more real and more vulnerable with each other. Let's call out the good we see and tenderly address the hurt as we trust it with one another. I will certainly try to do this more in my group.

Who am I going to share this with?

My community group!

Saturday June 20: 1 Corinthians: 14-16

Dare to believe in life after life

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Chris Simmonds:

What did I like about today's reading?

I love the picture Paul uses in 1Cor 15:36-37 of our resurrected bodies being like a plant that grows from a seed that falls to the ground and dies – this being the picture of our current bodies. This metaphor really helps get a handle on the whole resurrection of the dead / afterlife / new heavens and new earth thing.

Just as a seed is incomparable to a plant and a butterfly's glory completely eclipses the caterpillar's so will the New Creation be.

Now this resurrection / tongues / prophecy stuff obviously requires quite some mental gymnastics for the modern, materialistic mind to get around. And I'm conscious that mine has been conditioned in a cultural milieu that would still on the whole probably relegate such hopes into foundless idealism. Maybe you also experience some 'cognitive dissonance' when trying to come to terms with the supernatural emphases of our faith?

What really interests me is that here in today's reading is that we find people were already cynical about the afterlife as the New Testament was being written. Indeed you may remember Jesus admonishing the Sadducees for their lack of faith about the afterlife. So the cynicism of our time is no new gift afforded by scientific progress – it has been with us much, much longer.

But I love that Paul's argument in favour stands on Christ's own resurrection. So, while we haven't - if we're honest - really got a scooby do about what or where heaven is, or what the New Heavens and New Earth might come to be in the future - what we do know is that Christ came back to life with a new resurrected body. Many people, on multiple occasions witnessed a new Jesus body which could walk, and eat and drink, a body which bore the marks and scars of this life, while also not somehow being bound by the physical laws that limit ours.

But still this was not a ghost-like ephemeral body. Perhaps as with C.S.Lewis' *Edil of Perelandra* - which are not less real than the walls they pass through, but more so. It is the denser object that cuts through to the marrow, it is the lead weight that can plumb the ocean depths.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

This teaching about resurrection suggests a more wonderful and if I can be forgiven for using the word - 'magical' - universe than reductive rationalism has perhaps lead us to think possible. I am no scientist but my understanding is that Einstein's universe is much more mysterious and wonderful than Newton's. Indeed I do wonder whether we might be on a trajectory as a species that will over the coming decades witness an ever-increasing confluence between the evidential findings of science and spirituality.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I am going to allow my imagination, and my hope, freer reign. I am going to try to root out any hard-wired embarrassment about the supernatural claims of scripture and instead dare to believe that there really is just so much more going on in all of this than any of us have even begun to suspect.

God help me, and us, as we pursue a more radical life that images and radiates a God who is both in all things and beyond all things. As we allow his Abundant Life to flow in us and through us to the buried seeds around us.

Who am I going to share this with?

The impossible, miraculous masterpieces that populate this city.

C.S.Lewis - "It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship"