

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, July 3, 2016
Rev. Andrew Reid
I Corinthians 2:1-5, 3:5-9
“Letters to the churches – Corinthians”

If you have been around New St James for any length of time, you will know by now that I usually follow the Revised Common Lectionary when choosing Scriptures and planning worship. I have done so for as long as I can remember, and really value the discipline that the Lectionary imposes on me and the wealth of Scripture that it exposes us to over the three year cycle.

But if you have been around New St James for a bit longer, you will probably also know by now that I like to take a break from following the Lectionary over the summer months, and choose a theme or a series for a few weeks. I am doing just that again this summer. Today and for the next few weeks, I am going to take us on a quick canter through some of St Paul's letters to the churches that we have in the New Testament. We won't go into any one of them in great depth: it will be a quick, high-level run through the letters. And it won't be in chronological order, from earliest to latest, just the order in which they appear in the New Testament. But I hope it will give us a quick, high-level sense of what they are about and how they may be connected to one another. So today: Letters to the churches – Corinthians.

Paul wrote two letters to the Christian community in Corinth. The first is addressed *to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours* 1 Corinthians 1:2. The second is addressed to *the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia* 2 Corinthians 1:1.

Corinth was and still is a city in Greece, situated on the isthmus of Corinth, the narrow stretch of land that links the Peloponnese with the mainland. The present city is located about 78 km west of Athens, and about 3km north-east of the city that Paul knew. It was destroyed by an earthquake in 1858, which led to the building of the new city.

Paul wrote what we know as his first letter to the Christians in Corinth to address a number of concerns that he had with the way the Christian community there was living and with what they believed.

He opened his letter with what we now know was his usual greeting, the words that I adopted a few years ago to open every service I lead: *Grace to*

you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ 1 Corinthians 1:3. He follows that up with what we also now know as his usual prayer of thanks for the people to whom he was writing, and words of encouragement to them to continue faithful in their witness to the Gospel. And then he launched right into the meat of the concerns he wanted to deal with. And there were several of these.

One was the division that had developed in the Christian community. Part of that division revolved around leadership, and people choosing the teacher whose teaching they chose to follow over against others. He addresses these matters in chapters 1-3.

Another concern was over things that were rife in the secular culture of Corinth and that seem to have spilled over into the Christian community. Part of this was sexual immorality, and part was the resolution of disputes within the congregation rather than taking them before the court system. He addresses that in chapters 5-6.

Chapters 6-16 deal with a series of matters that the church in Corinth seems to have asked Paul about. These include marriage, eating food that had been offered to idols, congregational worship, appropriate dress for worship, the Lord's Supper, spiritual gifts, a major theological statement about the resurrection, and the collection that was being taken among the churches to help the poverty-stricken believers in Jerusalem.

And the letter closes with a series of personal greetings to and from individuals who worked with him.

In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, 1 Corinthians runs to 16 chapters, 437 verses, and 6,830 words – no, I didn't count them myself, that's what computer programs are for. But how can we possibly summarise so much text in the time that I have left for this sermon?

I chose the two passages that I did for today for two reasons – maybe really only one: because they both point to the heart of Paul's message to the Christians in Corinth and to the world as he preached the Gospel. The message is that it's all about Jesus Christ. Not about us, not about human wisdom or eloquence, not about human skills or accomplishment, not about human achievement and success. It's all about Jesus Christ.

Two stories to illustrate that. I remember many years ago being interviewed by a search committee looking for a new minister for their congregation. One rather formidable-looking gentleman took very little part in the conversation, but eventually burst out with the question that I am sure he

has been wanting to ask right from the start. 'Do you preach the Word?'

Now as soon as I hear a question like that, I am pretty sure I can guess what lies behind it. I know I shouldn't have done it. Cathy has told me I shouldn't have done it. But I couldn't resist playing along for a bit.

'Yes, I preach Jesus Christ, the Word that became flesh and lived among us.'
'But do you preach the Word?'

'Yes, I preach Jesus Christ and him crucified.'

Getting a bit irritated now – 'But do you preach the Word?'

'Well, if you are asking me if I believe that every word in the Bible is literally true, and that we should follow exactly every rule that the Bible lays down, then no, I don't preach the Word. But you don't believe that either.'

Really annoyed now. 'What do you mean, I don't believe that. I certainly do. How dare you accuse me of not believing the Word!'

'Well,' I said, 'St Paul closes his first letter to the Corinthians with the words *greet one another with a holy kiss*, and you didn't kiss me when I came into the room.'

Needless to say, I wasn't asked to preach for the call there, to my relief and no doubt to his.

The other story is one that a colleague of mine who will remain nameless told me about himself. One Friday morning, he woke up with a terrible case of the flu. Coughing, sneezing, congestion, stomach upset, elevated temperature, the lot. Highly alarmed, he went to his doctor and begged for something to help him get better. The doctor told him that he would give him something, but that he would have to rest up for several days.

'I can't do that,' said my colleague. 'I have to preach on Sunday. My congregation is expecting me. I can't possibly let them down.'

The doctor looked at him for a moment and asked, 'How old is your congregation?'

'125 years old next year,' replied my colleague proudly.

'125 years old,' said the doctor. 'Are you really telling me that they can't survive you missing one Sunday? Do you really think that you have to be

there for the Gospel to be preached and for people to worship? Do you really think you are so important?'

My colleague took that Sunday off. The congregation survived. Because it's all about Jesus Christ

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified ... 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
1 Corinthians 2:1-2, 3:5-6.