**Concerns about a third visit to Corinth** 1/5/22 dkm

Read: Psalm 51, 2Corinthians 12,

Text: 2Corinthians 12:20-21

Psalms: 135:1-7, 15, 25:1-7, 133

The apostle Paul was the founding father of the church in Corinth and loved the Christians there. But he was critical of this church for its divisions and disorder, and for tolerating sexual immorality and idolatry in their midst. He writes of these concerns in his first letter, called 1Corinthians. A member living in incest was tolerated, and even praised by some as being liberated (1Cor 5:1). After two letters, and a painful visit, and another harsh letter delivered by Titus, they took disciplinary action against this man and he repented. Paul was pleased to hear this news when Titus returned, but it seems that sexual immorality and other corrupt conduct continued in this church.

Paul’s attempts to teach the Christians at Corinth how to conduct themselves as followers of Christ were seriously thwarted when false teachers came to this church from Judea. Much of 2Corinthians, especially from chapter 10, has been focused on these false teachers, with Paul exposing them for their teaching and their conduct. It appears that they went along with the sexual immorality and idolatry in this church. What they did was encourage the church to go on the offensive against the apostle Paul. It is said that the best form of defence is offence. They did their utmost to discredit Paul and undermine his authority over this church. In this way immoral conduct could continue unchecked. Pagan religions are marked by idolatry of course, and also by sexual immorality. Corruption of the gospel of Jesus Christ is also marked by idolatry and sexual immorality.

As Paul concludes this letter, he turns from defence to offence. He has already spoken of a third visit (12:14), and in these verses expresses apprehension at the sort of conduct he might find in this church when he visits. Paul was a persevering preacher and apostle of Jesus Christ. He was not about to overlook conduct that was contrary to the gospel he preached. A gospel that tolerates sinful behaviour in not the true gospel, any more that a gospel that preaches ‘another Jesus’ (11:4). ‘If anyone loves me he will obey my teaching’ said Jesus (John 14:23). Our subheadings today are: ‘Fights and quarrels continue’ and, ‘Fornication continues’.

**1. Fights and quarrels continue**

While writing this letter from Macedonia, Titus returned from Corinth, to the great relief of the apostle Paul. Titus had delivered Paul’s severe letter and Paul was eager to learn of their response. Titus brought good news regarding their discipline of the incestuous man and his repentance. But not all the news was good news. There were still divisions and sexual immorality in the church, things which the false apostles were seemingly not concerned about. But Paul was their true apostle and he was concerned about these things.

Paul made clear his position, the position set down in the Scriptures, in his letters and his painful visit. But from what he had learned, presumably from Titus, the Corinthians had not changed their ways. In 1Corinthians 3:3 he wrote, ‘You are still carnal. For where there is envy, strife and divisions among you, are you not carnal’. Despite Paul’s condemnation of the party spirit between Apollos, Peter and himself, there is no mention of this being dealt with. Moreover, there is evidence that the coming of the false teachers led to further divisions in the church, although there was a certain degree of unity in their attacks upon the apostle Paul.

As Paul prepares to visit the Corinthian church for a third time, he fears that he will not find their conduct acceptable according to what he had taught and demanded from them. He also fears that they will not find Paul as they might have expected. They had been listening to a lot of slanderous talk about Paul and probably expected him to be a weak little man whose bark was worse than his bite. Paul goes on to assure them that this will not be the case (13:2).

Pride is very pernicious, and the Corinthians seem to have displayed an abundance of this sin. They were ‘me first’ people, grabbing food and drink ahead of others, speaking over one another in disorderly meetings, and taking one another to court if wronged (1Cor 6:6, 11:21). Such behaviour leads to divisions, and is called carnal or worldly by Paul. Such behaviour is not in keeping with the example given by our Lord Jesus Christ, who washed the feet of his disciples, and ‘came not to be served but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many’ (Mk 10:45).

Paul lists particular behaviours which he feared he would find in the church at Corinth. The first is contentions or strife or quarrelling (12:20). The first chapter of his first letter addressed divisions in the church, in which each one was saying, ‘I am of so and so’; it was all ‘I’ and ‘me’. Where does such behaviour come from? James asked this question, and also answers it; it comes from the desires of the flesh, and ultimately pride (Ja 4:1-6): ‘God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble’ (Ja 4:6). Pride leads to envy or jealousy, to anger or outbursts of wrath, and to selfish ambitions, as Paul goes on to say in verse 20. Jealousy is covetousness, the desire to have what your neighbour has and you don’t have (Exod 20:17). ‘You lust and do not have’ (Ja 4:2). Lust can lead to anger and temper tantrums in which self-control goes out the door. Ambition, the desire to do well and get ahead, is not sinful in itself, but when this desire means trampling on other people it is selfish ambition and sinful.

Paul goes on to backbiting or slander, something he was experiencing at the hands of his opponents in Corinth. Whisperings or gossip falls into the category of sins of the tongue, which James addresses in strong words in chapter 3 of his letter. This small part of the body can do an untold evil. Gossip was the way of life in Corinthian society, as it is on our society. Social media had facilitated gossip and its disastrous effects upon a community. The community of God’s people should be different; it should be a gossip-free zone, but is this true? The church should be marked by members speaking the truth in love (Eph 4:15).

Paul ends his list of behaviours not appropriate or acceptable in the church with the mention of conceit or arrogance, and tumults or disorders. In his first letter, Paul spoke of people being ‘puffed up’, a good description of arrogance, and the literal meaning of the Greek word. Pride reveals itself in arrogance, in an ‘I know everything’ attitude, and hence a ‘me first’ attitude. Paul said he would burst this pride bubble when he came to Corinth in the power of Christ (13:4, 1Cor 4:18-20). We have a saying, ‘The higher they rise the harder they fall’, and so to avoid a hard fall it is best not to rise too high in your opinion of yourself.

**2. Fornication continues**

As Paul contemplates a third visit to Corinth, he writes of apprehension about another matter, namely sexual immorality in the church. The matter of sexual immorality ‘not even named among the Gentiles’ seems to have been dealt with but not the matter of prostitution (1Cor 5:1, 6:15f). In Corinthian society prostitution was widespread; it was even part of pagan worship. If ever anyone could claim ‘everyone is doing it’ the Corinthians could do so with regard to prostitution.

Paul uses three words with regard to sexual sins that continued in this church. The first is ‘uncleanness’ or ‘impurity’ (12:21). From this Greek word we get the English word ‘catharsis’. These people needed to repent and undergo catharsis with regard to lustful thoughts and actions. Paul did not say ‘feed sexual immorality’ but ‘flee sexual immorality’ (1Cor 6:18). Pornography is a curse in our society and even in the church. This word actually comes from the next Greek word, ‘*pornea*’. Many a sexual abuser and rapist admits to an addiction to pornography. We feel compelled to warn readers and viewers about sexually explicit material on the screen, but the question of decency or morality does not get raised, even in the church. People talk about the morality of climate change but not the morality of sexual behaviour. And, sadly, some Christians think that whatever society says is legal, is permissible for them. The apostle Paul called for the Christians in Corinth not to live by worldly or carnal standards but by the standards set down in the Bible.

Fornication or ‘*pornea*’ is translated ‘sexual immorality’ in some Bibles. It refers to any sex outside marriage, especially prostitution; adultery is included, although there is another Greek word for adultery. Although sex before marriage is condoned or tolerated by many Christians, it is not condoned in the Bible. The ‘everyone is doing it’ excuse was not accepted by the apostle Paul, and is not acceptable for believers today.

The third word Paul uses is ‘lewdness’ or ‘debauchery’ or ‘sensuality’. This means living without moral restraint. The media is always ‘pushing the boundaries’, as they say, with regard to sexual content. Like some in the church in Corinth, writers and producers want to excel in lewdness and indecency. Party and festival organisers also promote lewd and debauched behaviour.

The Corinthian Christians had been washed and sanctified from their lives of fornication, adultery, homosexuality, and sodomy (1Cor 6:9, 11), but these sins persisted in the lives of some. Satan does not let his slaves go without a fight! Paul had warned them in his earlier letter to flee sexual immorality, but some had not yet repented of this sin. He believed that in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit they could repent and flee sexual sin, but he also believed in the authority and power of Christ given to him as an apostle, and to the church courts (Mat 18:17-20).

How wonderful it would have been for Paul to come to Corinth and rejoice with these believers in their victory over all sexual sin, and all lustful behaviour. How wonderful it would have been if the church at Corinth stood as a beacon of light within this city, the name of which was a byword for gross sexual immorality and corruption. The apostle, however, feared this would not be the case. He feared that his third visit would be like his second ‘painful’ visit. He feared that when he came, God would humble him among them (12:21). He would be witnessing his failure as a pastor to help these converts live in holiness, and in obedience to the commands of Christ. Paul would be left mourning rather than rejoicing, seeing people who had believed continuing in sin, or returning to sin because they have not truly repented.

Paul’s concern is shared by many pastors in the church. Sadly, pastors see more converts returning to sin than they do converts going from strength to strength in their Christian life. Mourning for members of the church is the lot of many a pastor, but we keep praying and hoping that the Lord, by his word and his Spirit, will bring revival, and through revival, joy and rejoicing to his servants, and glory to God.