**Final warning to the Corinthians** 15/5/22 dkm

Read: Matthew 21:12-27, 2Corinthians 13

Text: 2Corinthians 13:1-9

Psalms: 25:1-6, 119:153-160, 86:11-17, 72old

The Pharisees were jealous of Jesus because of the crowds following him. They got angry at Jesus when he condemned their corrupt behaviour. When Jesus drove the money changers from the temple these Jewish leaders were indignant. They confronted Jesus demanding, ‘Who gave you this authority’? (Mat 21:23). Jesus did not answer their question because they did not answer his about John the Baptist. But on another occasion, Jesus answered a question about bearing witness of himself. He knew the law of Moses required two or three witnesses; Jesus first spoke of John’s witness but then referred to a higher witness, namely the works which ‘the Father has given me to finish’, and to the witness of the Father himself (John 5:36-37, 8:17-18).

The apostle Paul faced similar questions about his authority, the apostolic authority given him by Jesus. Paul did not go around lording it over men and women any more than Jesus, but he was entrusted by the Lord with oversight of the church. Sinners do not like submitting to authority- does anyone like being pulled over by a traffic cop? Christians do not like submitting to authority either, especially if they are intent on continuing in sin.

The Corinthian Christians were intent on exercising their ‘freedom in Christ’ but did not understand that being a new creation in Christ Jesus meant living in newness of life. Sins of the flesh continued in the Corinthian church (12:21), and Paul was determined to rectify this situation. The church of Christ must look like Christ, not like the world. Moreover, Christ is the head of his church. As an ‘apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God’ Paul urged the ‘backsliders’ to repent and change their ways if they wanted to be spared when Paul came. Their attempts at undermining Paul’s authority had failed, so it was a case of, ‘Look out when I come this third time!’ Our subheadings are: ‘Third and final warning’, ‘The power of Christ’ and, ‘Test yourselves’.

**1. Third and final warning**

With the help of false teachers, the Corinthians had tried to undermine the apostolic authority Paul. For these false teachers, discrediting Paul meant they could take control of this church. For the sexually immoral members of this church it meant they did not have to listen to Paul and could continue living in sin. This is why Paul was compelled to defend his authority, with some boasting (12:11). Paul loved them too much to let them wipe their hands of him. He knew that wiping their hands of him meant wiping their hands of Christ! Moreover, Paul could not compromise on the gospel that he preached because it was the gospel of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Not even the church has the authority to change the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the demands of this gospel as set down in Scripture.

As he draws this letter to a close, Paul tells the Corinthians that he is ready to visit them for a third time- twice he tells them (12:14, 13:1). During his first visit this church was established. His second visit was hasty and brief, a painful visit to deal with the man living in incest, it seems; the church had failed to discipline this man according to the demand made in his first letter (1Cor 5). Pauls refers to this visit here in verse 2: ‘I have already given you a warning when I was with you the second time’ (13:2 NIV).

Always anxious to base his teaching and conduct in holy Scripture, Paul refers to the Law of Moses which required every matter or charge to be established by two or three witnesses (13:1, Deut 19: 15). He may have recalled Jesus referring to this law when teaching about authority and discipline in the church (Mat 18:16). But Paul appears to adapt this law by saying his first two visits were like two witnesses, and that his third visit would be a ‘clincher’ with regard to establishing three witnesses.

Paul is saying that he has given sufficient warning in his first letter and second visit, and now in this second letter, so his third visit would be one of action. After his painful visit, Paul was reluctant to visit again; he wanted to spare them so wrote a letter instead (1:23). Things had changed since that time, such that he was now ready to come again and ‘not spare’ them (13:2). The incestuous man had been disciplined, but other forms of sexual immorality, e.g. prostitution, continued, so it seems (2:6, 12:21). The false teachers were a complicating factor in Pauls’ visit, but he was ready to deal with them also.

**2. The power of Christ**

‘Since you seek proof of Christ speaking in me’ (13:3). The contest between Paul and the false teachers at Corinth boiled down to who spoke with the authority of Christ. Paul had shown them to servants of Satan; he was the only true servant of Christ (11:13-15). If the Corinthians were seeking proof of Christ speaking through him, Paul was ready to provide such proof. Paul saw the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus; it was a vision of power, not of weakness. Paul knew the power of the resurrection (Eph 1:19-20). He writes, ‘That I may know Him and the power of his resurrection’ (Phil 3:10).

He also knew the weakness of Christ of course; Christ was crucified in weakness, and Paul imitated Christ in his weakness (13:4). His ministry was one of weakness, of being humbled and suffering for the sake of the gospel. The Corinthians knew Paul’s ‘weak presence’ and ‘contemptible speech’ (10:10), but just as Jesus’ crucifixion was followed by resurrection, they should remember that Paul’s weakness would be followed by power if necessary, the power of the risen Lord Jesus. God raised Jesus from the dead with great power. There is no greater power known to man than the power of the resurrection, the power of a dead person being raised to life. Paul, assures the Corinthians, especially those living in sin, that he is coming in the power of the risen Christ: ‘We shall live with Him by the power of God towards you’ (13:4).

Did not Jesus say, ‘All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth’ (Mat 28:18), and did he not give his apostles ‘power from on high’ to preach the gospel in all the world’? (Luke 24:49). The power available to the apostle Paul was from Christ, from the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Those in the church at Corinth who questioned his authority and power were warned to take note of this truth. ‘Paul will not come in the supposed power of visions or ecstasy but in the power of a godly man ‘in Christ’, who will exhort, judge and grieve over the unrepentant’. Barnett goes on, ‘We must be prepared to exhort, encourage, and discipline those who have fallen into sin, as well as restore the penitent’.

**3. Test yourselves**

Just as Paul was an ‘in Christ’ man, so all true Christians are ‘in Christ’ people. When we repent of our sin and believe in Jesus Christ we become ‘in Christ’ people. ‘And if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new’ (5:17). Paul writes of walking ‘in newness of life’, a life of victory over sin, not of compromise with sin or succumbing to sin (Rom 6:4-7). Every believer should know the power of Christ or the Holy Spirit, by which he or she can overcome sin.

How would the Corinthians see ‘proof of Christ’ in Paul if they did not know Christ themselves? Truly, Christ was speaking through Paul and he was also ‘mighty in you’ (13:3). Paul challenges them to examine their hearts and lives to see if they were ‘in the faith’, to see that ‘Jesus Christ is in you’ (13:5). Before judging Paul they should judge themselves. Let them humble themselves before the Lord. Let them examine themselves in the light of God’s word. If Christ was truly in them, they would ‘repent of the uncleanness, fornication and lewdness’ in which they indulged (12:21).

When Jesus said, ‘Judge not that you be not judged’ (Mat 7:10) he did not mean that there is no place for judgment of one another- as some claim! What he meant is that we must examine our own heart and life before we look at others. Instead of judging Paul, the Corinthians should examine their own hearts and lives to see if Christ was living in them- ‘unless you are disqualified’ (13:5). Some try to use this verse to prove that a person can be saved and then lost, but Paul is simply asking for self-examination. If one does not pass the test they are of course, disqualified, meaning they were never ‘in Christ’ or ‘in the faith’ (cf. 1John 2:18-19).

Paul however, is confident that after self-examination the Corinthian Christians will see their sin and repent, and that they will understand that Paul is ‘qualified’ to be exhorting and warning them as he was doing. ‘It is somewhat ironic that discovery that their own faith was true should in fact point in the direction of the genuineness of Paul’s apostleship’ (Grogan). They might remember that they came to faith through the preaching of the apostle Paul!

Paul vigorously defended his faith and life against the claims of the false teachers, but he was not competing with the believers themselves. He was their father in the faith. He was not purging the church of unbelievers but was imploring them as believers to repent and return to Christ, and to accept him as their father in the faith.

Here at the close of his letter, Paul says he is praying to God for the Corinthians; we have assumed that he was doing a lot of praying as he wrote this letter! Paul prays that they ‘do no wrong’ but in fact do what is right or ‘honourable’ (13:7). He was not intent on proving his credentials by exercising the power of Christ in their midst. Paul was prepared to look disqualified, to look weak and vulnerable, if they would act to change their ways before he came. What Paul wanted was for them to mend their ways and then, as the body of Christ, to live in conformity to the teaching of the gospel. Paul was not about vindicating himself or restoring his reputation. He was about them repenting and restoring their relationship with Christ. Restoration of their relationship with the apostle would follow.

Paul would not put up with any compromise when it came to the gospel and living the Christian life. His prayer was based on the absolutes of right and wrong. He prayed that they do what is right and not what is wrong (13:7) because some things are right and some things are wrong. Paul’s prayer comes with two fundamental truths. Firstly, truth is absolute so, ‘we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth’ (13:8). ‘What is truth?’ asked Pilate. Jesus is the truth, he is ‘The way the truth and life, and no one comes to the Father except through’ him (John 14:6). There is only one gospel of Jesus Christ, and only one way to live for those who are ‘in Christ’, the true and living way.

Secondly, as a minister of the gospel, Paul prayed and laboured and suffered, ‘that you may be made complete’ (13:9). The Christian life is a journey that must be completed; it is a race to run, and no one gets the prize unless they finish. Paul would spend and be spent for the souls of the believers in Corinth (12:18). Are you focused on finishing the race? What about those running with you; are you concerned for their souls? What about your own children; are you concerned for their souls? Are you praying for them? Are you teaching them the truth and doing all you can to ensure they press on in the faith even after they leave home, and even after your death?