**Closing greetings and blessings** 22/5/22 dkm

Read: 2Corinthians 13, Philemon

Text: 2Corinthians 13:11-14

Psalms: 100old, 130, 125, 133

We recently visited a display of artefacts brought to Canberra from the British Museum. The display was called, ‘Ancient Greeks’. My wife thought there would be scrolls containing the writings of the ancient Greeks, but display consisted of many ‘amphora’ or painted pots, marble statues, and metal coins or medallions. I was interested in the exhibition because the Greek Empire flourished not long before the apostle Paul visited the city of Corinth.

The Romans conquered Corinth in 146BC, but Greek culture persisted. A temple of Aphrodite, with its thousand or more priestess-prostitutes, and a temple of Apollo, were places of worship in this pagan culture. In the exhibition we saw a white marble statue of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. The Greeks were keen competitors in sports, in the arts, and in war. The Olympic Games began not far from Corinth, which had its own Isthmian games. These games included athletics, field events, wrestling and equestrian competitions in which men competed naked men, as well as music and drama competitions.

Greek society was made up of slaves, merchants and traders, and the rich. To show off their riches, citizens became patrons of artists, and sponsored performances. Such patronage may have discouraged Paul from accepting a preaching fee while at Corinth. As mentioned, there were no scrolls in this exhibition; it was all pots and statues and coins. The Greeks of course, wrote books or scrolls but parchment and papyrus pages readily decay. The oldest copy of ‘Caesar’s wars’, which was written between 58-50BC, is some nine hundred years later than Caesar’s day. Paul wrote his letters on parchments around 55-56 AD; we have fragments of these from just three hundred years after the date of writing. The earliest extant fragment of the NT is on a papyrus dated at just one hundred and fifty years after the time of writing.

As Paul closes his second letter to the Corinthians, he was probably reaching the end of his parchment or scroll. This may be why his greetings and blessings are brief. It is interesting that both his letters are of similar length. As missionaries, we wrote letters on ‘aerogrammes’, a single piece of paper that was folded and sent by air; we had to squeeze our last words up the side of the page!

**1. Goodbye**

After telling the Corinthians that he was ready to visit a third time, and urging then to examine themselves and reform to their ways, the apostle Paul writes, ‘Finally, brethren, farewell’ (13:11). ‘Brethren’ is regarded as an old word nowadays but is still in the dictionary, with the meaning ‘members of a religious society’. The word ‘brothers’ might be ‘softer’, but then we have to use ‘brother and sister’ all the time. Be than as it may, Paul is saying farewell or good bye to the brethren in Corinth. Our word ‘goodbye’ is of course, a shortened form of ‘God be with you’. Paul is conveying wishes of joy and gladness towards the recipients of his letter. The Christian life can be, and should be, one of joy, even in hard times.

Such wishes extend into exhortations to ‘become complete/perfect’ and ‘be of good comfort’ or ‘be encouraged’ (13:11). The word ‘complete’ carries the sense of mend or repair your ways, or to set in order. Paul’s concern was for their ‘mending’ as individuals and as a Christian community. He mentioned this in his prayer back in verse 9. He wanted to see spiritual maturity, not ongoing carnality. Paul wanted to be encouraged on his visit, and above all wanted them to be encouraged in the faith and in holy living. The Greek word ‘*parakaleo*’ means to call to one’s side, to help and to comfort.

The third ‘be’ is ‘be of one mind’. This was a particular challenge to the Corinthians. History tells us that Greek society was a particularly competitive; a competitive spirit is not conducive to unity. Church members have different gifts of the Spirit which they should be encouraged to exercise for the building up of the whole church. Gifts of the Spirit are to be exercised in the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22). Note the contrast with what Paul fears he may find when he visits Corinth: strife, jealousies, outburst of anger, selfish ambitions, backbiting, whisperings, conceits, and tumults (12:20). Asking them to be on one mind was a big ask, but with God all things are possible.

‘Live at peace’ was Paul’s final ask (13:11). Peace remains elusive while ever we walk in the ways of the world because peace comes from God. In asking them to live at peace, Paul reminds them that God is the God of love and peace (cf. 1John 4:8). We see God’s love in sending his only begotten Son into this world to die bearing our sins (John 3:16). ‘God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him’ (5:21). If we see and know God’s love in Jesus Christ we must live in love, love for God and love for one another.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus we also see God making peace with us, who were separated from him because of our sin. ‘Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Rom 5:1). Again, knowing we have peace with God, we can and must live in peace, peace with God and peace with one another. The apostle Paul urged two women at Philippi to be of one mind, to know the peace of God in their hearts, and to ‘Rejoice in the Lord always’ (Phil 4:4). ‘And the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus’ (Phil 4:7). He could have written the same words to the Corinthians, to all of them it seems.

What Paul writes as he closes this letter reminds us of the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:26: ‘The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; The Lord lift us his countenance upon you and give you peace’. It also reminds us of the words of the risen Jesus when he appeared to his disciples: ‘Peace be with you’ (John 20:19, 21). Paul believed Jesus’ promise to his disciples as he effectively said goodbye and ascended into heaven: ‘Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age’ (Mat 28:20).

**2. Greetings**

Paul’s greetings in this letter are very brief. He mentions no names even though he has often spoken of Titus. He mentions Timothy as co-author of this letter but not here in his closing greetings (1:1). Paul writes from Macedonia, maybe from Philippi, where the people may not have been known to the Corinthians. For this reason, and because he was coming to the end of the page, Paul simply writes, ‘All the saints greet you’ (13:13).

Paul’s first greeting is actually for the Corinthians to, ‘Greet one another with a holy kiss’ (13:12).He tells the Romans to do the same thing (Rom 16:16). This was probably the sort of kiss practiced by the Jews, and practiced widely in the Middle East still today, among men and women separately. A ‘holy kiss’ was not sexual in nature, of course. Greeting with a kiss was common in our culture some years ago, but a handshake is more acceptable among men- or it was before the pandemic.

Just as refusing a handshake was seen as unfriendly or rude before the pandemic, so it was with the holy kiss spoken of by Paul. ‘Holy kisses’ were probably few and far between in this church with all its divisions. Family members embrace and kiss when meeting one another. The church is a family is it not, the family of believing brothers and sisters in Christ.

**3. Grace**

The closing words of this letter are no doubt familiar to you. You hear them as the benediction or closing blessing in many worship services. It is a popular benediction because it includes all three persons of the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit; although the Lord Jesus Christ comes first in this verse. It is important that we refer to the holy Trinity in our worship because it is a biblical truth that is rejected or misunderstood by sects and other religions. It was of course rejected by the Jews in Paul’s day, as it is today.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is at the heart of the gospel. Paul preached ‘Christ crucified’, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks (1Cor 1:23). This is the message of the gospel and this is what he preached. Apart from the cross of Christ there is no salvation! Salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Grace is the opposite of works: Grace or ‘*charis*’ means unmerited favour. Jesus Christ, who had no sin, took our sin to the cross and died in our place. The penalty for sin is death, and Jesus took this penalty for us.

God the Father is the almighty creator of heaven and earth, and the judge of all people; although Jesus was associated with the Father in creation, and Paul refers to the ‘judgment seat of Christ’ (5:10). But in this benediction God is love. This is because of God’s love for us in sending his only begotten Son, Jesus, into this sinful and corrupt world. We love God because he first loved us. We see God’s power and majesty in the creation, not least in his creation of us, but his love we see in the cross, where his beloved Son died in our place. We see his power again in the resurrection, but apart from the cross there is no salvation for you or me or anyone in this world.

God the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, promised by Jesus and sent by him at Pentecost; he is eternal with the Father and the Son of course. The Holy Spirit is given to all who believe; he convicts of sin and guides us in the truth of Scripture, and stands beside us as our helper in prayer and in times of need. The benediction refers to the ‘communion’ or ‘fellowship’ of the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit, we have fellowship with God and with his son, and fellowship with one another (1John 1:3).

We spoke of brethren being members of a religious society; it also applies to members of a guild or order or profession. I play tennis with men who like tennis as I do, but we have little else in common. People have ‘fellowship’ with workmates because they share the same profession, but usually not much else. As Christians, we have fellowship because we share a love for Christ. This sharing is much deeper than merely sharing the same love for tennis. Christian fellowship involves the indwelling Holy Spirit- we share the same Holy Spirit. Christian fellowship goes across racial differences, class differences, age differences, gender differences, and political differences.

In Paul’s day, Christian fellowship extended across the huge Jew-Gentile divide, as well as the rich-poor divide or master-slave divide. In the book of Philemon the apostle urges the master of a household to accept back a runaway slave because he was converted and was now more than a slave- he was a beloved brother. Is Christian fellowship unique in this regard? Tasker writes, ‘The only lasting fellowship between men is the fellowship of sinners redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ’. Let us remember that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is the basis of our fellowship in the church. This indwelling reaches right around the world, and extends beyond this age into heaven itself.

The Holy Spirit is given to us as God’s seal upon our hearts, as a guarantee that we belong to him (1:22, 5:5). But we must not grieve the Holy Spirit or quench the Spirit (Eph 4:30, 1Thes 5:19), something the Corinthians were doing in their arrogance, their contentions and their sexual immorality. When we let the Holy Spirit guide us, we will demonstrate the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control, to the glory of God, Amen.