**Developments in the church at Corinth** 22/8/21 dkm

Read: John 8:1-20, 2Corinthians 1

Text: 2Corinthians 1:1-2

Psalms: 75, 5:1-7, 18:23-30, 72old

Some years ago, no long after being called into the ministry, I went along to a seminar at Macquarie University. The topic was the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians. I went along because the speaker was Paul Barnett, my minister during my days at university; he went on to become a respected NT scholar. I had not really studied 2Corinthians so struggled to follow the discussion, but it was clear a couple of other scholars did not agree with the speaker. The notes I took have been lost but I recall that the discussion was about the unity of this letter. I have since reads Barnett’s writings on this subject, along with the writings of other scholars- but still feel none the wiser!

Many readers have noticed a change in tone in the last four chapters of this letter, and some postulate that 2Corinthians is actually two letters joined together. Paul becomes defensive and sarcastic in tone because some in the church at Corinth, spurred on by ‘false apostles’, were denouncing him as an untrained speaker, as being bold in his writing but weak in person, and as being dishonest (11:6, 7, 13). His character, conduct, and calling as an apostle were all under attack. So we find the apostle excusing his boasting, boasting about his sufferings for Christ, by way of authenticating his apostolic authority. These are the chapters in which learn about Paul’s ‘thorn in the flesh’.

This letter, more than any other, gives us insight into the pastoral heart of the apostle Paul, the servant of God who brought the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. In his first letter we learned of the many problems that arose in this church at Corinth after his departure. Divisions over personalities were first reported to him. This led to personal criticism directed at Paul; Apollos was a better orator and some liked a powerful speaker. Paul rejected this personality cult within the church saying that both he and Apollos were but ministers of the gospel. Other matters reported to Paul while he was in Ephesus related to gross sexual immorality, as well as a failure to love one another, leading selfish conduct within the church. The main doctrinal matter of concern was the place of spiritual gifts in the church and teaching on the resurrection of the dead.

Paul had previously written a letter to this church telling them to discipline the man openly living a sexually immoral life, but they misunderstood what he wrote and failed to take the necessary action against this man (1Cor 5:9f). In the letter called 1Corinthians he tells them in no uncertain terms to discipline this man no matter who he is; it seem he had supporters among the libertine faction, people whom Paul labels as ‘puffed- up’. Undermining Paul’s authority as an apostle served the purpose of this party of ‘puffed up’ rebels. They convinced themselves and others that Paul was weak and would not show his face again- but Paul assured them he would return soon (1Cor 4:18).

**1. Circumstances of 2Corinthians**

What happened after the church at Corinth received Paul’s letter answering their concerns and demanding church discipline towards the incestuous man? The only record we have of what happened is found in this second letter written by Paul to this church; there is no question that Paul is the author of this letter (1:1). It is evident that the apostle’s relationship with this church some five years after his departure had become very strained.

Paul was in Ephesus where the Lord was blessing his ministry, but as the church grew so did opposition. This come to a head in a city wide riot, and Paul had to leave Ephesus in a hurry (1Cor 16:9). In the meantime Timothy, whom Paul sent to Corinth with his letter or around the same time, reported back to Paul, and his report was not encouraging. Paul was rather fearful about sending his young helper (1Cor 16:11), and it seems his worst fears were realised.

Here in 2Corinthians Paul refers to a ‘painful visit’ that he made following Timothy’s return (2:1). The visit was short and sharp. They were not ready to support Paul in acting to expel the sexual offender. It seems they sided with this man when he insulted the apostle to his face; some were visiting prostitutes anyway. Paul returned to Ephesus and wrote a stern letter, often referred to as the ‘tearful letter’ (2:3, 4). This letter has been lost, although some think it has survived in the last four chapters of second Corinthians. Paul says he wrote this letter with ‘many tears’, but later seems to have regretted at least some of what he wrote (7:8).

It seems Titus took this ‘tearful letter’ to Corinth, and Paul was very anxious to hear back from him (2:13); he could not risk sending the Timothy again. Titus was a Gentile convert who proved to be a good peacemaker. Paul in the meantime, had been forced to leave Ephesus and was on his way to Macedonia. Eventually Titus made his way to Macedonia with some good news from Corinth; the church, the majority at least, had acted to discipline the offender. Their discipline led to repentance such that the apostle now urges them to forgive and comfort this man (2:6,7). Accepting or tolerating immoral conduct in the church means leaving the door open for Satan to attack; failure to forgive and restore a sinner who repent gives the same opportunity to Satan (2:11).

This letter called 2Corinthians was written by the apostle Paul in response to news brought by Titus while he was in Macedonia; there was good news, and bad news as we will see. Paul may have been in Philippi, Thessalonica, or Berea. Was it during this time that he went across to preach in Illyricum (Rom 15:19)?

Putting all these events on a time line is not easy, but it is generally agreed that he wrote 2Corinthians in the summer of AD56. Some say he wrote 1Corinthians earlier in the same year, but to account for all that happened in Paul’s contact with this troublesome church since writing 1Corinthains, namely Timothy’s report, a ‘painful visit’, a ‘tearful letter’ and a crisis in Ephesus that forced Paul to flee, it is best to envisage a period of at least twelve months between these two letters. Paul would go on to visit Corinth a third time at the end of AD56 (13:1). He spent three months there, during which time he wrote the book of Romans (Acts 20:2-4, Rom 16:21-23).

**2. Collection**

When the apostle Paul was given ‘the right hand of fellowship’ to go to the Gentiles by the leaders in the church at Jerusalem, they asked him to ‘remember the poor’, which Paul was eager to do (Gal 2:9, 10). This appears to be the beginning of the church-wide collection for the church in Judea. Paul must have set this collection in place when the church in Corinth was established because one of the concerns they wrote about was ‘the collection’ (1Cor 16:1). With all the immorality, division, and bad feeling towards Paul, this collection took a back seat in this church.

But Paul never lost focus on the broader church, and this collection in particular. He saw it as a material response by the Gentile churches to the spiritual blessings they had received from the ‘mother’ church in Jerusalem (Rom 15:27). Included in this second letter are two chapters urging the troubled, but relatively rich church in Corinth to complete this collection? In fact, Paul expresses joy at the arrival of Titus not just because of repentance and renewal of fellowship in this church but because Titus had been able get this collection back on track. Paul’s planned visit to Corinth was originally about this collection. It was his sudden ‘painful visit’ that made this planned visit a third rather than second visit.

**3. Unity of the letter**

I noted in our introduction the change in tone in the last four chapters of this letter and how this has given rise to theories about these chapters coming from a different letter, namely the apostle’s ‘tearful letter’. Anyone holding to such a theory has a lot of questions to answer: Who joined the letters, and why? What happened to the greetings with which Paul and everyone else began their letters? Such theories were first proposed by a man called Semler in 1776; before this date there was no question about the unity of 2Corinthians.

So how do we explain this change in tone, the sharp and sarcastic language and the uncharacteristic boasting of the apostle Paul? Along with good news about repentance and restoration in the church at Corinth, Titus brought bad news to Paul in Macedonia. There was still a minority who rejected the authority of Paul. Besides this, a new threat had arisen in this church. As Paul himself said, Satan is always ready to take advantage of division in the church, and agents of Satan had infiltrated this divided church.

The bad news brought by Titus was of so called ‘super-apostles’ or ‘false apostles’ who had brought false teaching into this church (11:5, 13). These men were Jews, most likely from the church in Jerusalem; remember James telling Paul of the ‘myriads of Jews who have believed and they are all zealous for the law’ (Acts 21:20). These men were not exactly Judaizers telling Gentile believers they had to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses, but they did not like Paul telling the church that the old covenant had given way to the new. They came to Corinth with letters of commendation, possibly from a faction in the church in Jerusalem (3:1) and claimed to be apostles.

These men readily joined those in Corinth who were undermining Paul’s apostolic authority, and according to Paul, undermining the gospel itself (11:4). They were dangerous men masquerading as apostles but in truth were agents of Satan. No wonder Paul rips into them and does all he can to convince the brethren at Corinth of their deceit. At the same time ‘bares all’ to convince them that he is a genuine apostle. He did not need letters of commendation because his conduct and his suffering for the cause of the gospel, said it all.

**3. Salutation**

When I write a letter in my capacity as minister I usually indicate that capacity, ‘moderator’ or ‘convenor’, when I sign my name at the end of the letter. In Paul’s day they did this at the beginning of the letter. So, as with his other letters, Paul began with his name and then indicated his title with respect to the church, ‘an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God’ (1:1). This declaration had particular significance in this letter because some in the church at Corinth did not recognize his status as an apostle.

‘Apostle’ simply means ‘sent one’ but in the Bible it means the Twelve. Paul claimed this status because of his vision of the risen Jesus on the Damascus Road, and the church leaders accepted this. Paul was an apostle ‘by the will of God’, not by the will of man or even by the authority of the church. As already mentioned, the false apostles came with letters of commendation but Paul needed no such letters to assert his authority; he was called and ‘ordained’ by the Lord himself. The church itself was a letter of commendation (3:3), but more than this, his life of sacrifice and self-giving to the point of suffering were marks of his authority. Such marks will be found in the life of every true Christian.

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul includes Sosthenes as his co-writer, but here it is Timothy. Sosthenes was from Corinth and maybe had returned. One wonders if he was the man who helped Paul write that letter, and if Timothy was his amanuensis for this second letter. Timothy was not an apostle but he was involved in the planting of the church at Corinth and was sent there by Paul after writing the first letter. He was obviously with Paul in Macedonia when this second letter as written.

The second part of the greeting tells of the recipients of the letter. What is interesting is the inclusion of ‘all the saints who are in all Achaia’ (1:1). Paul wanted this letter read in other churches, including Athens and Cenchrea; we know very little about these churches (Acts 17:34, Rom 16:1). ‘Saints’, literally ‘holy ones’, refers to all believers; all believers are given the Holy Spirit so are holy! In this letter Paul speaks of believers being given the Holy Spirit as a guarantee (1:22, 5:5). Do you know the presence of the Holy Spirit in your heart? Do you have such a guarantee of your eternal salvation?

**4. Grace and peace**

The apostle’s greeting ends with a prayer or doxology: ‘Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1:2 cf. 1Cor 1:3). Grace is the undeserved favour of God. Grace is at the heart of the gospel from beginning to end. We are saved by grace and we are sanctified by grace. Because of God’s grace we have peace, inner peace, peace with God, and peace with one another (Rom 5:1). This is why it is said, ‘no God, no peace’. Do you, ‘know God and know peace?