

## INFANTS IN CHRIST

Deuteronomy 30. 15-20

1 Corinthians 3. 1-9

Matthew 5. 21-37

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

If you were at St Stephen's last week, like many people, you might not have noticed a very significant phrase at the end of the epistle reading, taken from the second chapter of St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In that passage, Paul draws a contrast between what he calls the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God; and he makes a distinction between the spirit of the world and the Spirit of God, which is given to all Christians. As he finishes that part of his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul writes (almost triumphantly), 'But *we* have the *mind of Christ*.'

This seemed to be Paul's amazing and profound final word. He was declaring that the members of the church in Corinth, and indeed all Christians, have a special mindset. Thanks to the Spirit of God, all Christians have been allowed to see what would otherwise be unknowable; they have been given a special revelation; they can see, and understand, what God is doing in Christ. Christians, says Paul, are able to see that the cross of Christ is *not* foolishness;<sup>1</sup> it is *not* a complete and senseless dead end; it is the key to the fulfilment of God's purposes for the world and for his creation. This revelation has been given to Christians as a gracious, unmerited gift from God. Without this gift, Christians would be as blind to God's purposes as are many of the rulers of this age.

But then we receive a sudden jolt as we hear the next bit of Paul's epistle to the Corinthians, which has just been read to us. What Paul says in this passage, the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 1. 18.

beginning of chapter 3, seems to almost contradict what he has written at the end of chapter two.

He writes, ‘And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, *as infants*.’ Paul’s tone is ironically confrontational. The Christians in Corinth think that they are mature and spiritual; but in actual fact they are carnal people because there is rivalry and division among them. The Corinthians had allowed themselves to become enamoured of the leaders who ministered among them, people like Paul and a certain man called Apollos. Apollos<sup>2</sup> was a Jewish Christian from Alexandria who possessed great skills in Greek rhetoric. He already had learnt much about our Lord before he arrived in Ephesus; and he began to teach in the synagogue there. He received further instruction in the Christian faith in Ephesus from Priscilla and Aquila, and then left that city to go to Corinth. Once in Corinth, Apollos was received with enthusiasm; and he became acquainted with Paul. When divisions arose within the church in Corinth, however, Apollos was admired by some Christians as a greater authority than Paul, perhaps because of his reputation as an orator.<sup>3</sup>

Paul confronts the Christians in Corinth, because they have got their priorities all mixed up. They have allowed themselves to form factions, each one in support of a different leader; and they have taken their eyes off Jesus, who should be ranked first and foremost. Human leaders, says Paul, are unimportant; and they are here only to serve Christ. But because of the Corinthian’s immature behaviour, Paul has had to coddle them. Their maturity is so lacking that they could only accept simple and basic teachings, the equivalent of milk and not solid food. The Christians in Corinth haven’t even got to the stage where they can have Weetabix. They have not recognised that only God and his work are the things that matter. They still have a lot of growing up to do.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Acts 18.24-19.1; Tit 3. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 1. 11-4.6.

We can only imagine, of course, how Paul's confrontational remarks were received when his letter was read by the Corinthians (perhaps in the context of a worship gathering). I wouldn't be surprised if the people didn't feel both angry and ashamed. They probably said to themselves, 'How *dare* Paul call us little babies?' But they might also have said to themselves immediately afterwards, 'Well, perhaps he has a point.'

In any event, Paul could not have been much clearer or more direct. One of these days, these people in Corinth were going to have to grow up; and the sooner they did so the better.

We should, however, not miss a significant detail in Paul's message to the Corinthians. Yes, he does call them 'infants'; but he also adds an important prepositional phrase: he addresses them as 'infants *in Christ*'. This prepositional phrase makes all the difference; because as most of us know, 'in Christ' is Paul's favourite shorthand way of referring to all the blessings we have as a result of Christ's saving death and resurrection.

As theologian Lewis Smedes once wrote, 'in Christ' represents a kind of situational Christology. To dwell 'in Christ' is to be located inside the new cosmic situation that Christ ushered in. Through Christ's sacrifice, the whole universe turned the corner from darkness back into light. The powers and principalities of evil were put to flight, and God's ultimate victory was secured and assured. Believers enter this new realm via the gift of faith; and through union with Christ, achieved by grace in our baptisms.

In his second letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul writes, 'If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!' What he means is that all things are already in the process of ultimate renewal;

and that we who believe in Christ already now bear that newness in our hearts. We participate in the future glory of the New Heaven and the New Earth; and we do it right here and right now, even while we still live in this broken world.

All in all, this is a breath-taking concept, and Paul proclaims all of that joy, glory and wonder every time he uses his favourite two-word expression ‘in Christ’.

In our epistle text from 1 Corinthians 3, it is ‘spiritual infants’ who are said to be ‘in Christ’; and this prepositional phrase takes some of the harshness out of Paul’s statement. Yes, yes, the Corinthians were being ridiculous; not just in their creation of fan clubs devoted to Paul or Apollos, but in a number of other areas that Paul had to address in his Corinthian letters. The Christians in Corinth argued about a number of things: spiritual gifts; doubts about the resurrection; lawsuits in the Body of Christ; a man in an adulterous relationship with his mother-in-law; poor people being deprived of the Eucharist . . . the list goes on and on. Those poor Corinthians had a lot of growing up to do.

But then, who doesn’t? Honesty compels almost any modern-day congregation to admit that on any number of points, Paul might call us spiritual infants, too. The good news is that spiritual infants, toddlers, children, adolescents, and the occasional truly-spiritual adult are all nevertheless and by grace alone ‘in Christ’. This seemingly unimportant prepositional phrase that is slipped into Paul’s otherwise chiding words is by no means a small thing.

Thanks be to God! Thanks be to God that the largeness of his grace *means more* than the smallness of our attitudes at times. And thanks be to God, because (as Paul reassures us) ‘*God gives the growth...We are God’s field; and we are God’s building.*’

Who knows? Maybe one fine day we will (as Paul predicts in another letter)<sup>4</sup> actually grow up into full maturity and measure the full stature of Christ. Infants, after all, have nowhere to grow but up!

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Eph 4. 13-16.