

1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-9
IN EVERY WAY – RICH!

This is Jack MacDonald. He is a 98-year old man from Seattle who wore tattered clothes with holes in them; who used food coupons to buy his food; who only ever used public transport. When he went into hospital for surgery he told his doctors to use generic drugs rather than the more expensive brand-names. Everyone who met him looked on him as an old man who was poor and who needed support. Then he died! He left \$188m in his will. He gave his money to three charitable institutions in Washington State. He lived a poor life when, in fact, he was extremely rich. People saw him as a poor man with not much to live on and gave him as much support and help as they could. He didn't boast about his wealth because he didn't want to be badgered by people looking for money. He was rich, but lived as if he was poor. There have been other, similar stories in the past!

For me this story is a parable of the Church in Scotland and has been for some time. The Church – rich or poor? By most measures that we use, the perception is that the church is poor and becoming poorer. The 2011 census tells us that fewer and fewer people in our community claim to be connected with the Church and more and more people have “no religion.” Fewer and fewer people attend churches – 3% of the Edinburgh population will be in church today. Money is becoming tighter: it is harder for churches to make ends meet. Leadership is becoming more and more scarce. Worse – there is no hope or expectation of things changing; there is no vision of a better future; “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18 AV) For lack of vision, the people of God are going through the motions of being church, with no real expectation of significant growth, or are desperately trying to find the key to turn things around – more prayer, more effort, more activity – finding the right things to do!

The Church in Corinth was a right messy church! It was a large church, but it was full of cliques, a divided church! In some ways it was a snobby church: some Christians looked down on others and the poor were left alone. Anything went in Corinth, both in terms of morals and in teaching. The Christians took each other to court, and there was little humility or care for their fellow-Christians; there was no thought for the consciences of others, but they simply behaved in any way that seemed good to them with no regard for the needs of others; they loved dramatic shows of faith and power in the Spirit, but were short on love rooted in truth. (par David Prior) All of these characteristics of the Corinth Church we can find in 1 Corinthians. These are poor ways for the Church to behave; there is no vision of who they were, it would seem; they had no idea of what God had given them and of their calling as the people of God. This is what the Corinth church is famous for; this is what we think of first when we hear “Corinth”. We are not like the Corinth Church; our poverty comes from other directions; for a lack of vision, the people perish!

1 Corinthians opens on very different tone. Paul actually gives thanks for these Christians. He's about to tell them off and set them straight on so many problems, but first of all he gives thanks to God for them! Here is grace personified! In giving thanks for them, he describes their wealth. On the surface they look poor Christians, with so many problems, and not much going in their favour, but there is another reality that puts even Jack's \$188m in shade! It revolves round “who they are” and “What they have!”

Who they are. “*To the...*” (1 Corinthians 1:2) There are three things: firstly, they are God's Church; secondly, they are set apart in Christ; thirdly, they are called to be holy. Here is the Church's identity – this is who we are! Paul reminds the Corinthian

Christians that they belong to God, that ultimately they are God's Church; they don't belong to Paul, nor to any of the other leaders of the factions; they are not their own lords and masters, but they are people who belong to God. As part of that sense of belonging, they have been set apart, 'sanctified' in Christ Jesus, set apart from the world around them to belong to God; that, in the first instance, is a status thing; because of what Christ has done and through His grace and their faith, they are 'saints', a set-apart people, set apart to serve Jesus. Then they are to live as if they are set apart – they have a purpose in life as God has called them to live a holy life, to be the kind of people that Jesus wants, a people that reflects Jesus to the world, a people that serves God in the world. These words and ideas describe the enormous privilege and honour that it is to be part of the Christian Church, and it is very different from the mess that will follow.

Here's a vision of who we are as the Church. We belong to God; we are God's set-apart people and we are called to live out that privilege in the kind of people that we are. If ever there was a privilege and honour and some purpose to live for, this is it! You can't get a higher privilege than this; even kings and presidents are humbled by this calling. Time and again, the Queen has described her reign as a service to God. We are told, as Christians, that we are of no account in our 21st century world, but there is another reality at work here, an unseen spiritual reality in which God is at work. We are people who belong to Him; the Church is His; we are called to be like Jesus in the world. That does not mean that any congregation has a God-given right to exist, but it does mean that God is still at work in His Church; He has not left us alone; He has not called back His grace; He has not gone away; we are still His Church, for all our faults and failings!

What they have: this is big-picture stuff: *"In Him..." (1 Corinthians 1:5) "Therefore..." (1 Corinthians 1:7) "He will..." (1 Corinthians 1:8)* We are not told what Paul means by these big phrases, but the big phrases are enough to make us think long and hard about our attitude to the Church, to Christian faith and what we have. To a Church that was falling out, that was disregarding the poor and so on, Paul says "you are rich; you have everything!" Here is a church that is rich beyond measure; in Ephesians chapter 1 Paul will spell out what many of these spiritual blessings are, but here he simply says that these Corinthian Christians have been "enriched in every way". That leaves nothing out; they need nothing; God has given them everything. "In giving us His son Jesus, God has given us all He has; He can give us no more; we have everything in Him." (Prior) We have \$188m in bank! We have grace and peace; we have the forgiveness for our sins; we have a new identity; we have a new nature, a new calling in life, new strength and power inside us by the Spirit, new hope, a new goal in life, a new identity as children with God as our Father. The Church has every gift that we need to be the people of God and to bear witness to God.

The Corinthian Christians have this because of the "lavish generosity" of God. They have not earned these blessings or done anything to deserve them; these are not blessings reserved for people who have succeeded in faith. These blessings and gifts come from the grace and faithfulness of God. Grace is the key to all of this; grace is God's love to people who don't deserve it. When we read the rest of 1 Corinthians or listen to the summary of it that I read earlier, it seems surprising that this Church should be described by Paul as he does. They are not rich; they are poor. They have lost their way, they are misguided, they are down-right rotten in the way they behave! Yet, in His grace, this less than perfect people have everything, and are rich beyond measure, and have every spiritual gift. They are rich, but don't see it! They are rich, but their minds are elsewhere. They are rich, but are living in poverty!

They were rich, but the problem was that they were seriously distracted; their minds were very definitely elsewhere. They should have been inspired to live a life centred on Jesus, but instead their life was centred on so many other things. Church life was centred on cliques and personalities – Paul, Peter, Apollos. Church life was centred on people boldly getting their own way regardless of the needs of others. Church life was shaped by the city of Corinth and its morals rather than the sense of being like Jesus. They were distracted by all of these things which meant that who they are and what they have in Christ Jesus is forgotten about; the vision of a people belonging to God perishes before it really gets going. Because they are distracted by these other things, Church life is poorer; their problems are allowed to run unchecked; they become famous for all the wrong reasons.

I suppose this is what bothers me about the Church in Scotland today. I see a Church that has lost this vision of who we are and what we have; we have lost the sense of being a people who belong to God and who have that enormous honour and privilege; I see Christians who consider ourselves poor and no longer rich in any spiritual sense; Christian faith is a struggle rather than a privilege. We are distracted by all kinds of things; some of these things are worthy in themselves and important, but are not the essence of the Church or of Christian faith and in that sense they distract us. We are distracted by money, or the lack of it; we are distracted by buildings and the need to keep them open; we are distracted by a lack of leadership, by the age-profile of the Church that is simply getting older, by trying to find the one thing that will be the key to reversing all of these trends. Individually we are distracted by the problems and difficulties of life.

Now, hear me well; these are important issues and I'm not making light of them for one single moment. I describe these as distractions when, because of them, we lose sight of our wealth, of our \$188m in the bank! When the issues of money, buildings, and congregational future are all we see when we talk about the Church, we are living a poor life. Yet, we have this vision to inspire us: we are the people who not only belong to God, but are graced by the lavish generosity of God who has given us everything. God cannot give us anything more; He has already given us everything; we have been enriched in every way; there is not another way left out; there is not another way missing; in every way we are already rich; we have every spiritual gift we need; we belong to God!

This is revolutionary! This turns the way in which we think about ourselves, about the Church upside down – if we let it! The Church is not a dead-end enterprise that will die out in a generation, simply saddled with debts and obsolete buildings! The Church is the people of God, rich in every way, with every spiritual gift, the people who belong to God and to whom God is faithful! Let nothing crowd out that vision; let nothing distract us from that vision. This is who we are and what we have. God has already given us everything and blessed us. We have \$188m in bank. Why not see?