

1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-9  
AN ENCOURAGING START!

How do you react to praise? How do you react when people speak well of you to you? It will depend on the kind of person you are! The extrovert will lap up this kind of thing; they will drink it in, almost as if they expect it, but will love it when it happens. The introvert will be embarrassed by it, and may even try to deflect the praise away by claiming not to be worthy, or by giving someone else the credit. Sometimes it is hard to give people praise for that very reason. When I was looking through my report cards to find the comments that we talked about earlier, there were some other comments that told me I worked well or worked hard or was a good pupil, but I decided to leave some of these comments out; why? Would it seem big-headed to quote these good comments even if they were deserved? Or was I more comfortable with comments that were vaguely critical and left me with work to do? I wasn't happy with them at the time! I suspect at time I was happier with the good comments and peeved by the teachers who saw my flaws!

It was interesting to watch the response to our Presbytery visit that again I referred to earlier. It is called the Local Church review and it happened for us in 2017. We had to write about ourselves, telling something of our story, explaining some of the ways church life is and some of our plans for the future, our hopes and aspirations. Then the visiting group came to talk to us about all of this and afterwards wrote up their reflections on their visit to us and it was all very good. They wanted to praise us for the work we have been doing and for the way the congregation is; they wanted to acknowledge the good things that we have been doing and they said that Juniper Green Church was doing well and should be commended. We were happy with that; who wouldn't be? But we were also concerned that there were things missing, reflecting some of the issues and challenges that we are still trying to address. When this was being discussed on the floor of Presbytery we wanted to point out these challenges and some of the things we thought were missing because other churches are in something of the same situation. Presbytery didn't quite know where to look; we were questioning a good report! We were appearing to deny the plaudits that were being thrown in our direction! Were we being ungrateful? In our mind we were being realistic!

Paul had spent 18 months in Corinth; you can find the story in Acts 18; he preaches the gospel, first to the Jews who then rebel and attack him, then to the Gentiles, and spent 18 months there teaching them about Jesus. At one stage, God reassures him "*Do not...*" (Acts 18:9) The story ends in a riot when the Jews brought Paul to court but the Roman officer has no interest in their case; it is all to do with their faith and he is not interested. The Jews turn on the synagogue ruler, a man called Sosthenes and they beat him up. When Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth, the letter comes from Sosthenes as well – is this the same man? Is he converted? Is he now a Christian? Perhaps. Paul's letter to Corinth is full of problems and issues: the church is divided, and they need to cultivate a sense of unity; there are questions of immorality, and they need to learn to be people who love what is right and good; there are questions of freedom, and they need to learn how to be free and to be disciples at the same time. There is lots to learn for our friends in Corinth, but Paul begins with praise!

*"I always..." (1 Corinthians 1:4a)* What do we think? Is this the right place to start? Or is Paul kidding them on? Well, he starts lots of his letters by saying "thank you" to God for the Christians to whom he's writing. It is not unusual! Perhaps in Corinth it is more surprising than in other places, but here we are; Paul is thanking God for the Christians in Corinth. You might say that he's not actually giving thanks for them and for anything they have done, because most of what comes next is all about God and what God has done for them and in them, but here is a people in whom God is at work. *"I always..." (1 Corinthians 1:4)* Why is that something worthy of praise? Because the grace of God can only be at work in their lives if their hearts are open to God, if their hearts are open to faith. They have lots to learn, but they have opened

their hearts to God and have believed in Jesus; the rest follows on from that! They are a people who believe, so Paul gives thanks to God for them. That leads on to other things.

They are “saints” – *“to those...” (1 Corinthians 1:2)* Now there’s a word that we use differently! “Saint” for us is a holy person, someone who behaves in very special way, someone like Mother Teresa. The New Testament uses the word differently: Christians are “saints” not because we are all specially good people, but because God has done something for us and to us. We are saints because God has given us new life; we are saints because we belong to God; because we are saints already then we need to learn to live a holy life. You can see how that is the other way round from now! Flawed, imperfect people; a church with problems and issues, are “saints”, God’s special people.

They are “rich” – *“In Him (Christ)...” (1 Corinthians 1:5)* Was there wealth everywhere in Corinth? It was a seaport, a commercial city – was it a wealthy place? Paul tells them they are wealthy in another way, rich with grace, because they have believed in Jesus. That sense of being rich comes out when they speak and in what they understand of their faith. They see that they are rich and Paul sees that in them.

They have everything they need – *“You do...” (1 Corinthians 1:7)* These gifts allow them to live a life of faith and help and support each other, to build one another up in their faith, to encourage each other in their faith and life. They can be the church well because God has given them all the resources they need to be the church in Corinth.

When people ask us about our church and what it is like, where do we start? All too often we start with things we don’t have: we tell people that we’re all getting older, that the congregation is getting smaller, that we don’t have people in this group or that age-bracket! Would we ever start with what makes us rich? We have people whose faith is strong and who are deeply committed to Christ and to the Church; we have a leadership that is looking to bridge the gap between the Church and the community around us; we have a sense that God loves us and so we have keen interest in sharing that love with other people; we have an income of £120K a year. All of that is true as well; all of these qualities make us rich, make us strong; this second list paints a different picture and conveys a very different attitude! God is at work in us! That is something to celebrate! The grace of God is at work in us! Do we see ourselves as rich?

This is an encouraging start for the Christians in Corinth, but they must go on. Paul will go on in his letter to address the issues and questions with which they need to deal, the matters that arise that need sorted. But this is a good start; they should be encouraged; they should take the praise that is offered and build on that. There are two building blocks: first, *“He will...” (1 Corinthians 1:8)* God has started working in the Christians in Corinth; he has started giving them grace; that grace will go on. Secondly, *“God who...” (1 Corinthians 1:9)* God will continue; God will carry on working, helping, forgiving, and saving His people; He will not turn His back on them; He will not go back on His promises. They can be confident of the future because God is at work by His grace and because He is faithful; they can depend on God completely and totally.

What does the future look like? We don’t know the answer to that question and it scares us! That is true whether we ask that question for personal reasons – “what does my future look like?” – or in politics, or in the church. We don’t know the answer and that sense of uncertainty scares most of us; I have not met very many people who can happily live with that sense of uncertainty, though there are some who are excited by not knowing what might be, and are happy to live with that risk, even embrace it! Most of us find it unsettling and hard to deal with, most of the time! There is a big industry in trying to bring a sense of calm to people by telling them their future, by horoscopes, or reading your palm, or psychic readings – you can find it all online, but I want to offer you a better way.

The Corinthian Christians were new to the faith, their church was a new church, their faith was a new faith, so their start was encouraging. For some of us, our start in faith was a long time

ago; for others it is still fairly new maybe. For our church, the start was well over 100 years ago and for the Christian faith in Scotland even longer; so our start as a church happened generations ago. Nonetheless, the two reasons to be confident still stand: God will keep us strong and God is faithful. Our confidence lies with God: the One who has begun to work in us by His grace will continue to work in us by the same grace; the One who has made promises to be with us always and everywhere, to forgive, to fill us with His Spirit, will keep His promises. This is what God is like; this is how God is; this is what He has promised to do.

What will things be like in 10 years time? I have no idea! I have hopes for what life will be like for me, for my family, for the church, for the world, but I have no idea whether these hopes will be fulfilled or not! The Church will still be alive, but it will be different; leadership will be different, the way we worship, the people, all will be different. That's scary for us, especially if we've invested a lot of time, energy, and money in the church we love. But these two things still stand and these two things hold us: God will keep us strong and God is faithful. God has not gone away; He is still here; He still loves and cares for us; He is still at work in our lives and in the Church. None of that will change. Through all the changing circumstances of life, the world, the church, God will keep us strong and God is faithful. Learn to depend on Him; learn to be confident in Him; learn to trust Him. That is hard! We want to know; we want to have a plan; we want to be in control! Find it hard when we don't know, or when we can't have a plan, or when we're not be in control. Can we find our confidence in Jesus?