

2 CORINTHIANS 7:2-16
THE LIVING, BREATHING CHURCH

Porcupines have a dilemma: the weather is cold and the group of porcupines needs to come together to keep each other warm; they know that by huddling close together they can share that warmth and help one another; instinct tells them that their warmth is found together with other porcupines. Here's the dilemma: coming close, their quills stick into each other and they can't avoid pricking one another with their quills. How do they manage it? How do they keep warm and yet not hurt one another? It involves choices and sacrifices – if they want one, they must give something up; do they sacrifice warmth for safety? The dilemma is famously used to describe the ways in which people interact.

The Church is a community where everyone is valued, accepted, given a sense of belonging and self-worth because of the gospel. That is a huge statement to which we'd all sign up, I hope. The Church is shaped by the values of Jesus, by His attitudes, and by His teaching on love for one another, no matter whom; the church is shaped by the gospel of grace, where we are accepted by God as we are and so we should accept and value one another as we are. Someone recently described to me the Church as a warm hug, a community of faith where they felt at home, loved, and cared for. Beware of ideals – they are so often disappointed, even shattered by reality. Because there is another reality: the church can be place where people are hurt, taken for granted, bullied, oppressed and who go away feeling lost. The Church has signed up to the theory, but so often practice has been sadly lacking: the gospel tells us that there is neither male nor female; we are all one in Christ; so how has the same church managed to treat women so badly for 2000 years?

Today, return to 2 Corinthians; we looked at the first part of this letter this time last year; the sermons still on the website and in the library if you want to catch up. This is the most personal of Paul's letters in which he reflects on his relationship with the Church in Corinth and gives us a great deal of insight into Paul the man as well as Paul the apostle! Today, through the eyes of one man, we see something of the web of relationships that make up the Church, what we might describe as the ideal to which we aspire and how these good relationships can be threatened! Sometimes we think that Paul is the hard, unfeeling Christian leader, who takes delight in saying hard things to churches. Read 2 Corinthians carefully and you will see a quite different picture of a man who is aware of his weaknesses, who reveals a certain vulnerability, who has come under attack from people who want to be rid of him and who needs support and encouragement just like rest of us.

Some people have arrived in Corinth and have gone to the Church with the express aim of undermining Paul and the gospel. They told the Church that Paul has exploited them, that he has used corrupt and underhand methods to convert them and that he has done this all for his own selfish benefit. Is that so? Here's his heart: *"I have..."* (7:3) Where do you find that quality of love and devotion? Where do you find someone willing to live or die with you? Are these the words of an unfeeling, uncaring Christian leader who is only thinking of himself? No; these are the words of someone who is completely and utterly devoted to his fellow-Christians in Corinth, to his family in the faith, to people he loves deeply. He cares for them and he wants the best for them; that is why he does ministry, to serve the people of God in the name of Jesus.

But here's his dilemma: he's had to write them a letter in which he's had to deal with some difficult issues. We don't really know what these issues were or even what letter he means. It might be 1 Corinthians; it might be another letter altogether. All we know is that someone did something wrong and hurt someone else and Paul had to

deal with this falling out from a distance; so he wrote them a letter. Now he is living with the anxiety: how will this be received? What will the outcome be? There is the potential for all kinds of hurt and resentment if the letter taken in the wrong way. Will this be the end of his relationship? Paul is longing to find out, but no-one has come to tell him. He is downcast with these fears; he is showing something of his vulnerability. Here's a man who is trying to do the right thing, but knows that it might well be costly in his relationships with others. Here's the porcupine's dilemma acted out in Paul: if he does nothing and stands off, he is negligent as a pastor for these people; if he acts and comes close to his friends, he runs the risk of alienating them by his strong words.

Thank God for Titus! *"But God..."* (7:6) How often in the Bible do things change around these two little words! Here they are again. To an anxious, harassed, fearful man, God brings comfort and encouragement in the shape and form of Titus. Titus was one of Paul's converts who has gifts of leadership and Paul has sent him to Corinth, perhaps with the difficult letter. Now he's wanting Titus to come back safely to discover how his letter had been received. *"But God..."* (7:6f) There are two encouragements here: firstly, Titus is back safely and Paul is delighted to have his friend back; secondly, he brings good news with him, that the people had received the letter in the right spirit and in the best way. Relationships are healed; the partnership in the gospel goes on.

Paul is not the only Christian leader to be caught in this dilemma. There is a difficult issue that needs to be addressed; there's a difficult sermon that needs to be preached; there's a falling-out that needs to be healed. What do leaders do? To do nothing is to be negligent in pastoral care and concern for the Church and the gospel and the people. To do something, they run the risk of alienating those involved and others who are related to them. Here is the dilemma and one that gives many Christian leaders sleepless nights because they know that no-one wins in these situations. These are occasions when leadership is a lonely place to be; Paul knows the loneliness of leadership, having made his choice, he is now having to live with that choice, but spending weeks wondering how it has worked out!

"Godly sorrow..." (7:10f) The Church heard Paul's letter and what happened next? Did they say "Who does he think he is? How dare he speak to us like that?" No! They said the very opposite. They heard Paul's letter and knew that he spoke the truth; they knew that he was right and set out to do as he said. Repentance is all about a change of mind, a change of heart, people who know they've made a mistake and that it needs to be sorted. Here is the Church full of sorrow for its faults and failings, yet full of the desire to put it right earnestly and eagerly. No wonder Paul is delighted to hear this good news, that the church that has grown in its love for Paul and their appreciation of his love for them. They've grown in Paul's estimation: *"I have ..."* (7:4) *"I am..."* (7:16) There was the potential for disaster, yet by the grace of God love grows, and the partnership is stronger; the Christians are encouraged to live out their faith and Paul and Titus are given the strength and courage to continue as Christian leaders.

Here's our dilemma. We need one another; we are made to be social; people are wired that way. Church is a group activity: worship is something we do with other people. So the comment earlier about church as a warm hug – we need one another; we take encouragement from one another and from a sense of belonging together. As a congregation we want to foster that sense of family and partnership together and we do things to try to encourage one another: this is what lies behind the ministry we call pastoral care, or the delivery of flowers or the e-mail prayer group. But the more we rub up against one another, the more potential for hurt there is; we make

ourselves vulnerable and that can be dangerous. Our instinct is to curl up in a little ball to protect ourselves and stay safe; we sacrifice warmth for safety; some have gone away from church, hurt because of the way in which they have been treated; some Christian leaders have given up their ministry because of the way in which they have been bullied and harassed by their congregations. That's the sad reality of life.

The Church shaped by Jesus and the gospel will aspire to be very different. The Church is the family belonging to God. We belong to God together! God has been at work in all of us and we are united by the fact that God has done and is doing the same thing in all of us. We share the same faith in the same Saviour, and the same Spirit is at work in us. These are the things that bind us together as Church. We need to have that sense of togetherness; here is the place to start to grow and develop that sense of belonging together; it's hard to have in a big church like ours, but we can begin to develop that sense of partnership in the smaller groups of which we are a part: the Kirk Session, the choir, the Bible study group, the nurture and prayer teams, the pastoral care teams. When we move away from seeing ourselves as individuals who happen to turn up at the same time as a whole pile of others for a Sunday morning service in this building, to seeing ourselves as partners in the gospel with one another, then we've made a start.

Thank God for Titus! God uses other people to comfort us when we're downcast! Not always, but the way in which God's comfort for us comes most often is through someone else. We need to recognise that. Paul thanked God for Titus; for whom would you thank God today because God has comforted you, encouraged you or strengthened you by their presence? On the other hand, we need to ensure that we are loving, concerned, Christ-like people. "Our eyes need to be open and our hearts generous with compassionate care" (Barnett) We don't even need to solve one another's problems, not even feel the need to provide answers to their questions, not even need to have wisdom to offer. "What matters most... is not 'saying things' but 'being there'." (Barnett) We are to be people who are aware of one another, sensitive to one another, and who care – that's what we aspire to be in Church; we need to repent of the times when we have been very different from that.

Our relationships are complicated, much more complicated than anything I've said this morning. But these relationships are hugely significant, much more significant than most of us realise. A single, careless word, even a look, something taken wrong way, a bit of gossip, can mean generations of resentment and hurt and doors closed to the gospel. Yet we need to be people whose eyes are open to needs of others, whose hearts are generous with compassion for one another and caring for one another's needs, people who know how important it is to be there for others – that's what we aspire to be and to be more of; that's what the world will see and admire and will be drawn to Jesus. How do we resolve this dilemma? Here are some words I found the other day; they are words from a song, but I don't know the song: "Don't shoot the wounded, they need us more than ever. Sometimes we just condemn them and don't take time to hear their story. Don't shoot the wounded, some day you might be one." Thank God for Titus!