

2 CORINTHIANS 8:16-9:5
AN HONOUR TO CHRIST

Let me tell you about Nom Com! I spent 2 days last week in the offices of the Church of Scotland in 121 George St, chairing the Nomination Committee. It has a very simple task, to find people to serve on the Councils and Committees of the Church of Scotland and to take a list of names to the General Assembly in May. People serve for 4 years and so, every year, a certain number come to the end of their term of service, so we need to find new people to take their place. You can suggest a name, of a member, or an elder, or a minister of the Church and that name will be considered; the Councils tell us what they want and sometimes who they want and so we discuss these names. Each 'name' is person; each name is Christian who is part of the Church of Scotland and is willing to serve the Church in this kind of way; we're given a potted biography of each person so that we can have a feeling for some of their skills and the expertise that they will bring to the group for which we nominate them. We find Christians who have experience as architects, in finance and business, in I.T., in social work, education, as well as the experience of serving in the life of their local church, as well as ministers who have their own kinds of experience and expertise to bring.

What do people see when they look at the Church? What would we like people to see when they look at the Church? What would we like people to think of first when the word 'Church' is mentioned? People! People of all ages, sizes and shapes; people who believe and are trying to grow that faith; people who are trying to live a good kind of life, who know they get it wrong, but are looking to be better at it. People with all kinds of backgrounds, who have all kinds of life-experience as well as faith-experience; people who are searching for something important, who are trying to live out the best kind of values in life and have these values shaped by Jesus. That's what we'd like to see and by God's grace that's what people see most of the time. "An honour to Christ" – that's a phrase in our reading and is the title of this sermon; it's what we want to be; it's what we try to be; it's not what we always are, but by God's grace and with God's help, it's what we might be better at.

When I first read our passage from 2 Corinthians today, I wasn't sure what to make of it. When I read it for the second time, I thought 'this is all about good practice in the handling of money' and when I read it again before writing this sermon, it dawned on me that it is all about people trying to be "an honour to Christ" in dealing with a collection. It's a story of Paul, the Church in Corinth and three men coming to visit. We talked last week about giving and these two chapters in 2 Corinthians are all about giving, especially money. We said then that in those days, there had been famine in Jerusalem and the Christians in Jerusalem were poor and were in need of help. So the Churches in Europe, places like Corinth, Philippi, and Thessalonica, held collections and gathered money together and in the end sent it to Jerusalem; seven representatives took it and their giving provided much needed help for their fellow-Christians in Jerusalem. Paul is making sure that the collection takes place and is well-handled!

For Paul there is a danger. Accusations are flying around, accusations that are easy to make and almost impossible to rebut. Some people had come to Corinth and were accusing Paul of making money out of the Corinthians. They were accusing him of making himself rich by his ministry in Corinth amongst other places. We'll see more of that later in this letter, but he has already said in chapter 2 "*unlike so...*" (2:17) and in chapter 11 he will mount a fuller defence in which he contends that he has offered the

gospel free of charge! He knows that there are people waiting to pounce on him and accuse him of taking money for himself; accusing him of the misappropriation of funds. He wants to avoid that danger completely and so this is all about honouring Christ and acting with openness, transparency and integrity. These are buzz-words around today; we thought they were created by OSCR and other government agencies; in fact, here in 2 Corinthians. Paul is determined that there will be no ground for accusation and that in everything, including the handling of money, the church is “an honour to Christ.”

There will be three visitors: Titus and two other, nameless men. There is endless speculation about the identity of these two others, one of whom might be Luke who wrote the gospel, but we just don't know. Much more fascinating is the way in which these men are described, in glowing terms. Titus: “*he is...*” (8:23) There is not much higher accolade that he could receive from Paul than that, a partner, a fellow-worker, so obviously Paul has a high opinion of Titus and the Corinthians know him because he's just come from there and now Paul is sending him back. Anonymous brother number 1: “*Who is...*” (8:18b) Here is a man praised by the Churches and chosen by the churches “by a show of hands” perhaps, as their choice to go with the money; someone they obviously trust and he's coming to help. Anonymous brother number 2: “*who has...*” (8:22) They are “*representatives...*” (8:23) The Churches have chosen these people to be their representatives; these are not just Paul's friends, but the churches have appointed these people to handle this money on their behalf, people they trust; so they should be welcomed well.

“An honour to Christ.” What does that mean? They are “a credit to Christ.” (Hughes) That's quite a big thing to say in itself. These men, by their character, their lifestyle, by the work they do, the way in which they handle themselves and perhaps by the way in which they've handled money in other churches – are a credit to Christ. By their faith and their faithfulness, their love for others and their obedience to Jesus as Lord, they are a credit to Christ. Hold that thought because I want to come back to it in a moment and tease it out a bit. For now, the Church in Corinth will have three visitors, people they can trust, people who have proved themselves.

The task for the visitors seems to be to make arrangements for the collection. The idea of a collection has been floated; the Christians in Corinth have said “what a good idea; we'd love to be involved in that collection”. Maybe they sent a message to Paul telling him that and he's applauded them for their zeal, their willingness to give. But now, next year, is the test of that zeal and willingness, because Paul's plan is to come round the churches collecting the money to take it to Jerusalem. They are willing to give and now Titus and his two friends are going to Corinth to arrange for the collection to take place, to gather the money, so that when Paul comes there will be a generous gift, freely given and ready for him to collect. “*On the...*” (1 Corinthians 16:2) His advice is “each week, put something aside, whatever you can give, a little each week, then we'll put it all together and take it to Jerusalem to help our brothers and sisters there!” Regular giving, each week, each month, is still the church's best giving strategy!

Let's tease out this notion of being “a credit to Christ.” There are some things it does mean, some things it doesn't mean. A wise man once wrote about the person who had the qualities of love and faithfulness “*You will...*” (Prov 3:4) There are two threads to being a credit to Christ and we need to get them in right order, else we tie ourselves in knots. These two threads are, first of all, about what God sees and secondly, about what

other people see. The first of these is far more important than the second and the second has to be firmly based on the first.

Being a credit to Christ is, first, all about our attitude to Jesus. Our overwhelming desire as Christians should be to please Jesus. Jesus is Lord. That is what Christians in every generation have said; Jesus is Lord and that means that He shapes our lives. It should be our great desire to please Jesus and that means all kinds of things. We please Jesus by our faith, by believing in the first place and by nurturing that faith, reading the Bible and praying. We please Jesus by the kind of people that we are, “love and faithfulness” according to the wise man in Proverbs, and all kinds of other qualities. We please Jesus by our attitudes to other people, by love and compassion and care and letting that love touch everyone we meet who is in need, even people we don’t like or our enemies. We please Jesus by our attitudes to all sorts of things, money, sex, possessions, work, school, church. By getting these things as right as we can, as often as we can, Jesus is pleased with us and we are a credit to Him. He knows our faults and our weaknesses; He understands that we’re not perfect; that’s no excuse, but the simple reality of our lives! Our challenge is to please Jesus and be a credit to Him.

What then do other people see? Do they look at us and think well of Jesus? That’s what we want! As soon as we start wanting people to think well of us for our own sake, we’ve lost our way. As soon as we start to congratulate ourselves for being good, then we’ve lost our way; pride gets hold of us and we’ve lost our way. But, when we live out our life seeking to please Jesus, people see us and think well of Jesus. When that happens, we are a credit to Jesus all over again. When people look at the Church and see a group of people who have faith and take that faith seriously, a group of people who take worship seriously most weeks, a group of people who love one another and look to help and care for and support people in need, a group of people whose values and attitudes are shaped by Jesus and the gospel – then we are a credit to Christ. The people who look at us may not applaud us for what they see; they may shake their heads in confusion; they may not understand why we are what we are. That doesn’t matter. When they see people looking to live life by faith, then we are a credit to Christ. When they see a group of people who sit lightly to that faith, or who treat one another badly, or for whom Christianity doesn’t really seem to matter all that much, or doesn’t touch our daily life, then we stop being a credit to Christ!

“An honour to Christ” What a great thing to have written about you! We don’t even know the names of the men about whom that was said! They handled money with honesty and integrity; they were zealous for the Lord and His Church; they were praised by the Churches for their service to the gospel. There is not a much better thing that could be said of us – “a credit to Christ!” It is a huge challenge; it is not about being perfect; God knows us well enough not to expect perfection; but He does expect carefulness, that we take care in way we live. We are to take care of our faith, to believe and to nurture that faith, we are to take care over the way we treat other people and the things that we say, we are to take care over our attitudes to money, work and such like, we are to take care over the kind of people that we are. What does Jesus see when He looks at the Church? What do other people see when look at us? A credit to Christ?