

Epiphany 2, Sunday 19 January 2020

'An attitude of gratitude – 1 Corinthians 1:1–9

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It's great to be back at church! Over the last two weeks the Brownes have been on holidays. And I really want to thank you all for the time and space to rest and pray that you've given us. It was a great time away and we had good quality family time swimming, reading, and playing with our boys but as we rolled back into Dalby, we thanked God that we were back home.

On our holiday we spent a week in Fiji and Fiji is green!

Crazy green!

There was green everywhere, there were green trees filled with paw paws and bananas and there were fat and healthy cows and horses on the side of the road surrounded by lush green grass.

One day we went to a waterfall.

To get to the waterfall we had to pass through a beautiful village with a bubbling stream and green gardens full of fruit and veggies all around.

Everyone was taking pictures, everyone that is except... who? Who do you think wasn't taking photos? (wait)

That's right the locals!

Fijian people are incredibly friendly, intelligent, godly people, but I did find myself asking "Do they realise that they live in paradise"?

Sadly as Christians we can become what I once heard a preacher describe as 'gospel locals'.

We can live in the wonder of being God's people and receiving God's love, we can live in the awesomeness of knowing that our ultimate home is with God in heaven but not live with an attitude of gratitude.

'Gospel locals' might claim the gospel but it has no impact on the way we live day to day.

Over the next five weeks we're going to be looking at the first four Chapters of 1 Corinthians.

The church in Corinth was planted by a guy named Paul who had a radical encounter with Jesus and went from someone who hated Christians to becoming a Christian himself.

The church was growing and seemed to be going well but the people had become 'gospel locals'.

They had forgotten their first love for Jesus and were beginning to take their relationship with God and each other for granted.

A standard greeting

The letter begins with a standard greeting format for a Roman letter. Look with me at V.1:

*Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ
Jesus by the will of God, and our brother
Sosthenes, to the church of God in Corinth,*

Unlike our letters today which go: Dear so and so, blah blah blah, Love so and so.

The sender comes first, then the recipient, then the body of the letter.

This letter is from Paul and Sosthenes (who could have transcribed the letter), to whom?

The church of God at Corinth.

Corinth was a Roman port city with markets, theatres, sports stadiums, and temples.

It was a little bit like the Gold Coast today in that it was a progressive, glitzy, metropolitan seaside city.

Power, prestige, and status mattered a lot in Corinth. Some people had money and they would use it to buy glamorous houses, slaves, and prostitutes.

Some had political power and were high up in the military or government which gave them a licence to get what they wanted.

Other people had religious power, perhaps they were priests, philosophers, or fortune tellers, who could help you gain favour with the gods.

Some had no power, wealth, or religious standing and these people were taken advantage of or forgotten.

It's into this melting pot of power, sex, and money that an annoying, loudmouth tentmaker sails in.

His name is Paul and we can read about his time in Corinth in Acts 18:

Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.

...

4Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

5When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.

6But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

7Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God.

8Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized.

Paul arrives in Corinth and tells the people that a Jew named Jesus, who was truly God in the flesh, was born in Israel about 50 years prior.

He tells people that Jesus is the one they'd all been waiting for and shows them from the Bible how God promised to send a saviour who would be king of kings and Lord of Lords.

He demonstrates from the Bible how Jesus died for us and made it possible for us to come to God.

The people in the synagogue don't like Paul's message so he goes 'all right I'm out and goes next door to preach to **supposed** heathens.

These non-Jewish Corinthians were chasing money, power, and sex, and he tells them to chase Jesus instead and miracle upon miracles that's exactly what they do!

People become Christians and the church grows.

So when Paul writes this letter to the gathering, or what our translators render 'church', in Corinth he's writing to a people he loves who are part of a movement that God started through him.

These are people he's eaten with, partied with, worshipped with and so he reminds these people who they are in .2:

2To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ--their Lord and ours:

In so many ways this is a standard ho hum start to a Roman letter.

From Paul to Corinth and a bunch of meaningless niceties that historians will tell you are part of every letter written at the time. But this is no ordinary letter.

He calls the Corinthians members of the gathering of God, they are a unit.

And what has happened to them?

They have been called by God. They are a holy people, chosen by God.

Like an outfit or piece of jewellery that you only use for special occasions these people are holy, set aside for God's purposes. But they are united in their calling with God's people everywhere and they are part of Jesus' redeeming work in the world.

Paul isn't wasting time on niceties, he's getting down to business right here and next he does something powerful landing a knock-out punch with his signature greeting.

You'll see it used in Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Peter. V.3:

3 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's a profound way to start a letter.

An awesome way to greet people you love dearly.

This is no ordinary greeting, it's unique to the Christian community.

It shows Paul's affection but also how he brings this divided group back to their first love, and how he is going to deal with their divisions.

He says grace and peace.

The word for grace is *charis* which also means gift' it's where we get the word: *charismatic* from.

Paul's reminding us of the great and glorious gift of salvation Jesus gives us. Grace comes first then peace.

Paul is reminding us of the peace we enjoy with God and with the world around us through the grace of Jesus Christ.

Jews like Paul longed for *shalom*, their word for peace.

Shalom isn't just an absence of violence and hardship it's a total state of being where everything is truly good and life is at its glorious best, the way God always intended life to be.

In this standard greeting we're drawn back to our first love and our hearts and minds are drawn into an attitude of gratitude for the grace and peace gifted to us through Jesus Christ.

Grace to you...

Our standard greeting makes way for an outpouring of thanksgiving to God. Paul has so much to say in this letter but in these words the foundations are being set for the message. Look at v.4:

4I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.

5For in him you have been enriched in every way--in all your speaking and in all your knowledge--

6because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you.

7Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.

This is a remarkably positive way to start a letter. It's glowing with affection.

It's so positive that some scholars think Paul is being sarcastic here.

This is because throughout the rest of 1 Corinthians we discover that there is a lot of negativity in Corinth.

When Paul calls the Corinthian Christians 'saints' or 'holy people' this is peculiar because the Corinthians are sleeping around, getting drunk, and playing power games in the church.

He talks about the grace given to them by Jesus when they have failed to extend any grace to each other, excluding poor people in their gatherings and bickering like crazy.

Paul talks about how the Corinthians have been enriched in speaking and knowledge when he's received reports that some are rejecting him because he's not a good speaker. Others are claiming special spiritual knowledge which makes them better than the rest.

In v.6 he writes about how the lives of the Corinthians back up his testimony about the goodness of Jesus, when he knows the life of this church is a mess.

Finally, in v.7 he writes about how the Corinthians don't want for any spiritual gifts and are eagerly waiting for Christ's return.

In 1 Corinthians 12 we discover that some in the church are claiming to have spiritual gifts that others don't, creating classes of Christians.

Spiritual gifts are creating divisions in the church and turning weekly services into circuses of hypocrisy and sensationalism.

At the same time false teachers have started saying that there is no after-life and that bodily resurrection at the last day is a pipedream.

Paul will go on to say this is nonsense but here in the introduction he's glowingly speaking of the Corinthians as if these divisions don't exist.

Is he being funny? Is he being surly and sarcastic? Perhaps, but I don't think so.

Instead I think Paul is drawing the people he loves back to their best selves.

He's heard reports of the worst stuff but he's also seen them at their best.

He knows what they're capable of and he's drawing their minds and hearts back to God's original purposes for them.

When I was a small boy I did a somersault through a plate glass door causing hundreds of dollars of damage. On instinct I ran and hid behind a cupboard from my parents who I was sure would be angry with me. When my mother got home, she saw the shards of glass and assumed that I'd been cut to shreds. When she found me she was so thankful to see that I was okay that she hugged and kissed me and held me for a while. Sure I

was scolded for being foolish but the initial reaction taught me more about her love for me and why it was dumb to do gymnastics around glass than any amount of scolding.

Paul is doing something similar here. He's angry about the divisions in God's church. He's sad about the hypocrisy, abuse, and sin in a church that he planted but he's reminding his readers of how much they are loved by him and how much they are loved by God.

...from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's here that the focus drifts from the Corinthians and onto the hero of Paul's letter: Jesus. He refers to Jesus nine times in these nine verses alone. It's here that we realise that this letter is not about the Corinthians, instead it's about Jesus and the difference he makes in our lives.

Look with me at v.8:

8He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

9God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

Jesus is the subject and the object of this letter.

Jesus is Paul's only weapon in dealing with the divisions in Corinth and if it weren't for Jesus Paul wouldn't care about these people at all.

Paul is reminding these 'gospel locals', these puffed up prideful, greedy Christians what they are meant to be about.

It's a sobering thanksgiving but it's also an attempt to instil an attitude of gratitude in the Corinthians.

The rest of the letter will tackle the problems the Corinthian church is facing but for now Paul is bringing them back to the source.

If Jesus isn't at the heart of our churches then it doesn't matter how big our church is, or how many ministries we have going, or how wonderful the music, sermons, kids' ministry or morning tea is. Christianity is pointless without Christ.

And when we truly see Jesus for who he is, our maker, our redeemer, and the one true king of all creation, we can't help but take on an attitude of gratitude.

I've met people who seem to have everything, but their lives are empty.

At the same time I've met people who seem to have nothing except their relationship with Jesus and they're overflowing with joy.

This is what Paul is getting at.

The Corinthians seem to be moving on from Jesus, they've heard that Jesus died for them and rose again to give them eternal life and they've begun to take this for granted, they're 'gospel locals'.

They're looking for the next spiritual high, the next entertaining preacher, the next sexual escapade, the next novel idea, the next thing that will make them happy and instead it's tearing them apart.

Why is this happening? It's because they're leaving Jesus behind.

Friends this isn't just something that happened 2000 years ago it's happening right now.

So often we can fool ourselves into leaving Jesus behind.

So often we can take our salvation for granted and move on with life as if Jesus means nothing.

Jesus has given us the breath in our lungs and the beat in our hearts.

He's made this world and everything we love and brings us joy. Jesus died in our place and went through the agony of hell so we wouldn't have to.

He rose from the grave charting our path back to God and the fullness of life found in him.

The Corinthians, like so many of us today, were looking for power and happiness. Here Paul writes that Jesus is the one who will keep us strong to the end. Finally, we are reminded that our unity, our fellowship, is with and in Jesus. Christians all over the world, followers of the one true God enjoy the most awesome relationship with the one in whom true happiness is found and are united together in him.

The word used here for fellowship is the exact opposite of the word for 'division'. The whole of 1 Corinthians and even 2 Corinthians will focus on divisions in the church and while our series will focus on the first four chapters which looks at divisions in leadership here our privilege of fellowship with Jesus is emphasized.

We're being called away from being 'gospel locals' looking for the next fix and into having Jesus glasses on. The Corinthians have a communion and fellowship with Christ that "exists now and extends to eternity. When we see our world through our own eyes we can often become tired, unhappy, and unfulfilled but when we look at our world through the prism of Jesus (when we put our Jesus glasses on) all of a sudden the world takes on new colour, new joy, and new possibility. Putting on Jesus glasses doesn't mean we deny reality and pretend everything is okay and ignore the suffering and hardship of our world. Instead it's seeing all those things in light of what Jesus gives us and the hope that he will return to put all wrongs right.

While lots of the locals in Fiji seemed not to notice that they lived in paradise there was one local we met who quite obviously did. We'll call him Soso because I couldn't pronounce his name but he was our guide to the waterfall that day. This eleven year old pointed out all the edible plants, told us all about the animals in the forest, and when we got to the waterfall he ran and jumped into the cool water. While some of the other guides looked a little bored by their task, Soso carried my son Micah across the creeks and treated every moment of our journey with wonder and joy.

That's what God wants for us friends.

God wants us to live in a state of wonder, joy, and hope; an attitude of gratitude.

Psychologists tell us that gratitude:

facilitates contentment, promotes physical health, enhances sleep, strengthens relationship, and builds up communities as grateful people 'pay it forward' and help others.

As we rejoice in the rain that's fallen over the last couple of days, let's put on our Jesus glasses and cultivate an attitude of gratitude to Jesus that sustains our Church and builds us up.

In Christ we have so much to be thankful for both now and into eternity. Amen!