

Daily Inspiration in 2 Corinthians (written April-July 2022)

St Paul's second letter to the Corinthians – usually abbreviated in your bibles as '2 Corinthians' – is less-well known than the other long biblical letters of Romans, 1 Corinthians and Hebrews, but it's a jewel with so much wisdom to share: about the new life that Christ offers, about generosity, about humility and the transforming work of the Spirit.

Above all, it reflects deeply on the tension we live with as Christians day-to-day: suffering and comfort, joy and trouble, spiritual treasures held 'in jars of clay', as St Paul so evocatively puts it. May this heartfelt letter to a church which Paul had himself founded and whom he loves deeply touch our hearts and lives in this Easter season.

Day 1 – 2 Corinthians 1:1-3 'The Father of mercies'

As we begin our journey in this letter, I want very simply to point us towards the true inspiration for, not just this letter, but all that we are and all that we do. Every New Testament letter has three audiences: the first two are the ones we expect – the original readers, and then all those who now read it as part of the witness of scripture. But St Paul never forgets that there is a third person always in view: the Lord himself. This is not just human interaction, but there is One who sits behind – or perhaps above – it all, and to whom all the glory is given.

Not surprisingly, the letter starts with praise to this glorious God, setting the God-bathed tone for everything which follows. And how St Paul describes this God is significant: in the NIV, verse 3 is translated 'the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.' This is good, but in this case I think the NRSV translation is perhaps even better: 'the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation.'

Who is God? This is a fundamental question which underscores all of existence. And what St Paul wants to remind us here, at the very start, is that God is both a loving parent, and also that mercy (or compassion) is at the very heart of his being. He is, to his very essence, the *Father of mercies*.

The puritan devotional writer Thomas Goodwin offers a wonderful reflection on this, which I cannot improve, and which deserves an extended quotation:

'God has a multitude of all kinds of mercies. As our hearts and the devil are the father of variety of sins, so God is the father of variety of mercies. There is no sin or misery but God has a mercy for it. He has a multitude of mercies of every kind... a treasury of all sorts of mercies, divided into several promises in the Scripture, which are but as so many boxes of this treasure, the caskets of variety of mercies.

'If your heart be hard, his mercies are tender. If your heart be dead, he has mercy to liven it. If you be sick, he has mercy to heal you. If you be sinful, he has mercies to sanctify and cleanse you.

'As large and various as are our wants, so large and various are his mercies. So we may come boldly to find grace and mercy to help us in time of need, a mercy for every need.'

So, whatever need you have today, come to the Lord's treasury: open the casket and find a beautiful 'mercy' which tends to your soul. The Father of mercies is ready, and willing.

Day 2 – 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 ‘God of all consolation’

Consolation is one of those words which has lost the full force of its meaning in modern times. Nowadays we use consolation to describe something that gives us a little lift when the main battle has been lost. A losing team scores a consolation goal. Someone wins a consolation prize after all the main gongs have been awarded. It's a comfort of sorts – but only a small one.

It's a shame because 'consolation' in the bible is a much bigger (and more beautiful) word than that! And here, in today's passage, we get a positive cornucopia of consolations – the word appears ten times in a just a few verses. The NIV translation of the bible – perhaps aware of the normal usage of 'consolation prizes' – prefers the word comfort, which is fine. Comfort is a good word – but it's a bit more passive, dare I say it, than 'consolation', which is the translation preferred by the NRSV and others.

Ignatian spirituality – derived from the teachings of St Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order – attaches huge importance to the concepts of 'consolation' and 'desolation'. For Ignatius, these concepts are dynamic: they define whether someone is moving towards, or away from, the active presence of God in the world. Therefore, to be in a state of consolation is to be moving towards God: finding his life at work in ours, his love in unexpected places.

So when St Paul describes our Lord as the 'God of all consolation', he is describing a God who desires that we should keep moving towards him. Seasons of suffering often cause us to question God's goodness or love or authority in our lives: doubts which may lead to us moving further away from beautiful intimacy with our Lord. But, as Paul insists, God doesn't leave us like that: 'where suffering overflows, so also consolation (comfort) overflows' (to paraphrase v5 slightly).

Indeed the word we translate as consolation or comfort here is derived from the same word Jesus uses to describe the Holy Spirit in John 14-16 – it literally means 'someone who walks alongside': the ultimate consoler, comforter, encourager, advocate.

God is, in his very nature, one who *consoles*, who draws us alongside. And therefore, wherever we find this kind of consolation (even in tough times) so we too can pass this on: 'we can comfort (console) those in any trouble with the comfort (consolation) we ourselves receive from God.' (v4)

So as we reflect on this wonderfully encouraging passage today, let's ask ourselves two simple questions: firstly what is consoling you? Where are your encouragements, what is drawing you closer to God?

Rest in that a while... and then ask: who can I console – lift up, draw closer to God – today?

Day 3 – 2 Corinthians 1:8-11 'Relying on God'

The spring of 1993 was quite a dark time in my life. It was my final year at college, and everything was going wrong. My mum was being treated for cancer, my first serious girlfriend had just ended our relationship, and my own health wasn't good: I was struggling with what was then called 'post-viral fatigue' – which put extra pressure on what revision I was able to do for Finals, since without a high mark I would not get the funding for the course I was hoping to do the following year. Day after day felt like wading through treacle – I tried to work as much as I could, but needed 10 hours in bed every night and wondered if I would have the strength to sit seven 3-hour exams in five days.

And then, a week before the exams started, something amazing happened. I was tossing and turning in bed in the early hours, desperately needing to sleep but too anxious to do so, when the Lord spoke. Just two words, but they had a profound effect: 'trust me'. It wasn't an audible voice, but I was as sure as I could be that it was the Lord, and it was the one thing I needed to hear. I felt this wave of calm seeping through my bones: what I would now look back and say was 'the peace that transcends understanding'.

The next two weeks were still hard, but I no longer feared either the exams or the future. I felt in my heart that whatever happened, I did indeed trust God.

As it happened, there was a 'happy ending': my mum got the all clear, I did get the mark I needed for the course funding and over the summer my health slowly recovered. But that wasn't the point: what had changed for me was that somehow I knew that, however things turned out, it would be OK; God had my back. He knew what was best; he was totally trustworthy.

If you're anything like me, you'll wish that you could learn all the spiritual lessons you need from the good times. That every upturn and blessing would lodge deeply in your brain and your heart, and you could thereby avoid having to learn anything the hard way. But, as most of us know, it doesn't really work like that. Many of the most precious things we learn come under trial, while conversely, we can be remarkably 'deaf' towards God when things are going well.

St Paul talks openly about this today: he refers to recent, great challenges in his life – probably far beyond anything we have faced, given his enormous capacity for suffering – but testifies that this had one golden purpose, 'that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.' This one lesson is so valuable, so precious, that he weighs it against everything and still praises God. Moreover, he also recognises that many others who were praying for him will have a testimony of answered prayer.

Ultimately, he uses one great phrase that we can hold onto today: 'On him we have set our hope.' Not just put or placed our hope, as something that sits loosely on top of a pile of life. No, we set our hope, as if we are digging down and pouring loose concrete around the base, so that this hope is fixed, unshakeable in every storm. Whatever you face at present, take heart: God is with you, you can rely on him – he's got your back. And may the Lord give us all grace to set our hope on him.

Day 4 – 2 Corinthians 1:12-22 ‘All “yes” in Christ’

Today’s passage is the first part of a ‘content sandwich’. We learn that part of the motivation for Paul to write this letter is that he needs to explain to his friends in Corinth why he did not come back for a second visit, something which had obviously caused them some concern: so the two slices of bread in this sandwich are verses 12-17 and then verse 23 onwards, where he outlines his reasons for not visiting them after his trip to Macedonia. We’ll look at this in more detail tomorrow.

But as he writes all this down he decides to put a gourmet ‘filling’ into his letter. He is just pre-empting the accusation in verse 17 that he is fickle, someone who says yes when he means no, and he’s prompted to add in a wonderfully inspired tangent. One of the amazing things about Paul is that he can never stop talking about Jesus for long, never go without praising or glorifying him for long, either. (As an aside, I want to have this kind of faith, maybe you do too!)

So as he thinks about his own yeses and nos, he is moved to declare (I paraphrase here): ‘Whatever we humans are like, with Jesus it’s all “yes”!’ Or to put it Paul’s way: ‘No matter how many promises God has made, they are “yes” in Christ.’ (v20)

Jesus is God’s big ‘yes’ to humanity. Our response is simply to say ‘yes’ in return: ‘And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God.’ We can do this confidently because God is directly and personally active in our lives from the point that we receive Jesus. In other words, from the point that we say this ‘yes’, he declares his favour towards us (anoints us, v21); calls us his children (the seal of ownership, v22); and gives us the Spirit as a heavenly down-payment, a guarantee of eternity.

This helps us to stand firm: whatever ‘no’s the world speaks to us, God keeps saying ‘yes’ to us in Jesus. This is not just true for Paul’s friends in Corinth, but for us too – God’s well never runs dry. However you feel today as you read this, whatever challenges you face, let’s not be discouraged. Jesus is God’s big ‘yes’ to you. Keep saying yes to him, and pray for grace to keep receiving that anointing, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Day 5 – 2 Corinthians 1:23-2:11 ‘Tough love, tender love’

Being ‘bad cop’ is never easy. Certainly I don’t like it, and find situations where I have to say something hard to someone very difficult. That’s probably a good thing – the day it doesn’t bother me is probably a good day to question my motives!

In today’s passage we learn that St Paul has had to play ‘bad cop’ very recently with the church in Corinth. We know from his first letter to the Corinthians that the young church there was very much a mixed bag – they were very passionate spiritually and exercised many amazing gifts; but they were also arrogant, divided and prone to some major moral blind spots.

Paul tackled some of these directly in that first letter; the aftermath – as far as we can piece it together from this passage – probably went as follows: (1) Paul has to make a ‘painful visit’ in person (this is probably the visit on the way to Macedonia referred to in 1:16) to try and rectify what presumably the church didn’t act upon as a result of his first letter; (2) despite this visit, a core part of the church remains unrepentant (bear in mind that churches were tiny, this core might only have been a handful of people), so Paul has to write another letter (now lost), more direct in confronting the issues (v3); (3) one particular person still refuses to acknowledge what Paul is saying (v5), and perhaps becomes personally abusive towards Paul (v5, v10); (4) this person is disciplined by the majority of the rest of the church (v6) – which probably meant being put out of the fellowship for a season.

This has obviously been an incredibly painful season for everyone involved – so difficult, in fact, that Paul decided he wouldn’t come back for his return visit to Corinth yet because he couldn’t face having to make ‘another painful visit’ (v1) i.e. having to play bad cop yet again. So he sent (or left) his friend Titus who would then come and report back to him what had happened – this is referred to in our passage tomorrow (v13).

Although, sadly, such things still happen in church communities today, it is thankfully rare that they get to this level of seriousness. That said, what is striking here is how Paul balances tough action with tender love. It’s clear that he finds having to do this excruciating, and he is at pains to stress how much he loves the people he is forced to confront (v4). He also is keen to extend forgiveness, even if he has been personally degraded by the person causing the trouble (v10) and now encourages the rest of the church to forgive this person, too (v7).

There’s so much in this text we could pray into today, let the Lord direct you towards any of the following: firstly, prayer for church communities to practise both unity and grace – it’s so vital! Second, prayer for courage to address issues – problems usually get buried alive – but to do so with the sort of love and compassion which we see modelled here. And finally, grace for all of us to forgive, and to allow the Lord to bind our wounds.

Day 6 – 2 Corinthians 2:12-17 ‘The aroma of Christ’

We live by our senses. Touch, taste, sight, smell and sound. And what is true of physical life is true in the spiritual life, too. Throughout Scripture you’ll find references to seeing and hearing, to people being touched by Jesus and even the injunction to ‘taste and see that the Lord is good’. Today, we complete the set, as it were: the central image of our passage is one of smell.

What does the kingdom of God smell like? That might sound like a stupid question, but I remember a friend of mine beginning a sermon like that a few years ago, at which point he gave the surprising answer: ‘It smells like dogs in church.’ Some of you at this point will be cheering inwardly, others grimacing, depending on your view of dogs – but the point he was making referred to a ministry his church had recently grown among the homeless of their area. A number of rough sleepers had connected with their church and wanted to come and worship on Sunday mornings: to make them feel welcome, the church had agreed that their dogs (essentially their most precious, perhaps only, possession) could come, too. So every Sunday, on the back row, God was meeting and blessing a group of people so often shut out from the rest of society. What a great story!

Smell is probably the least obvious of our senses, and yet so vital, too: it can warn us of danger, as in a fire or gas leak; it shapes our sense of self and how we present to others – the world spends an extraordinary £40 billion on perfumes per year; it also reminds us of key things in our lives – our home, a person. John Lewis pipes the enticing smell of a roast into its kitchen section because it sells more goods when it does.

And St Paul tells us today that we are to smell of Jesus in our relationships and conversations with others. It’s a great image, because the smell of something tells you a lot about what it is, and we often make decisions based on how something smells – both literally (is food edible or has it gone off) but also metaphorically – we admit suspicion by saying something ‘smells fishy’. So we are ‘the aroma of Christ’ (v15) to the world around us.

Paul is candid that some will like this fragrance; others will react against it (v16). As long as we’re giving off the right ‘smell’ that’s not our fault, by the way: God’s good news is embraced by some and rejected by others. That’s the bit which is out of our hands, and which we have to trust to God – as he admits, representing Christ to the world is an awesome task, and who is equal to it? (v16). Thanks be to God, he declares, that it is Christ who has already triumphed (v14), so we simply follow him and leave the rest in his loving hands.

So today, let’s resolve to ‘smell good’ – not our perfume, but our lives! May God grant us all grace to be a rich aroma to those around us, drawing them towards his beautiful love.

Day 7 – 2 Corinthians 3:1-6 ‘A letter from God’

As part of my job I often get asked to write references – something I’m only too glad to do for people I know well. In effect, what these forms are asking me is: ‘Can we trust that this person is who they say they are, and are they up to the job?’ To which hopefully I can reply: ‘As far as I can tell – yes!’

Today’s passage picks up the theme of references in a slightly unusual way. As the gospel spread around the world in the years after Jesus’ resurrection, the growing number of converts and churches also led to a particular cultural expression which was causing some difficulty. Wandering teachers were a part of the culture of that time, especially in Greece: some were authentic, others were bogus – but all of them were essentially trying to earn a living by their ‘knowledge’ and capacity to teach.

These teachers used to arrive with letters of recommendation to support their credentials – and it didn’t take long for such teachers to consider churches to be a good type of community to ‘get in with’: groups of people hungry to learn and welcoming to outsiders. It is clear that the church in Corinth had received a number of such visitors, and this had led indirectly to a number of problems.

Paul picked up on some of these problems in his first letter: in particular the divisions they created, as people ‘followed’ particular individuals; as well as false teaching which encouraged various practices incompatible with Spirit-filled faith. However, in this letter the issue is more personal. One of the things Paul wants them to understand is that some of these ‘teachers’ were charlatans, who simply wanted to make a quick buck – he refers to them in yesterday’s passage (2:17).

It also appears that this increasing use of letters of recommendation was causing some to mutter why Paul himself doesn’t bring such letters with him, to validate his own credentials. To which Paul replies in today’s passage: ‘You want a reference? *You* are my reference!’ (v2) In other words, if you want an example of Paul’s ministry, look at yourselves, and the way Christ has been at work in you: ‘You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God.’ (v3)

In the end, ministry is always about people – whatever else we achieve, the only true test of God’s work is changed lives. Are people drawing closer to Jesus, showing more of Jesus in their lives, with hearts more filled with love, joy, hope, purpose, peace, patience, mercy and kindness?

Today, take a moment to give thanks for those people who at various points in your life have helped you towards Jesus and enabled you to grow – you are their reference! But also pray to be that ‘reference’ to others, wherever God has placed you – that all of us might be people who bring the transforming light and love of Christ to those around us.

Day 8 – 2 Corinthians 3:6-11 ‘Spiritual ink’

Whenever I have to write or sign anything relating to a marriage, I have to use what is called ‘Registrar’s Ink’. It’s pretty scary stuff: leave it too long in a fountain pen and it corrodes the metal all by itself. But that’s because it’s designed to be indelible: for example, there is a marriage register at All Saints which goes back to 1837, and almost 200 years later you can read the details of the first entries because the ink hasn’t faded much. Every time I fill the pen, I manage to get some on my hands – and you’ll see me rushing to the sink to try and wash it off quickly!

As St Paul started talking about letters yesterday, it got him thinking about the ink which is used to write them. He made the point that his ‘legacy’ could not be defined by getting ink written on papyrus: rather for Christians, it’s what God writes on our hearts. Christian ink, if you like, is the Spirit, writing God’s love into the very fibres of our being.

This prompts him to draw another contrast, which addresses one of the hot topics of the early Church: namely, how following Christ relates to the Jewish law, which historically defined the way God’s people lived in obedience to God. And he draws the same comparison: just as changed lives are a much better reference than written letters of recommendation, so living life in the Spirit is a much better way of living out our relationship to God than defining ourselves by how well we obey the law.

It’s worth clarifying at this point something which might seem odd: why is the Jewish Law described as ‘the letter [which] kills’ (v6) and ‘the ministry that brought death’ (v7)? Paul doesn’t explain it here, but he does elsewhere: basically the Law shows us how far we fall short. The history of God’s people makes it clear that none of us can actually keep the whole law – so although the law is good and right, what it ends up demonstrating is that we can’t obey it, and therefore bring ourselves under condemnation (v9). The consequence, in other words, is separation from God i.e. death.

The good news of Christ is that he deals with all of that: he fulfils the sacrificial law by his one perfect sacrifice on the cross; sets us free from the requirements of the ceremonial and food laws; and, by his Spirit dwelling in our hearts, enables us to develop the virtues (or qualities, or, to use the bible’s word, fruit) which enable us to live out the moral law. So love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are the heart of the law – and Paul can say in that famous verse in Galatians: ‘against such things there is no law.’

No surprise then, that this ministry of the Spirit is glorious! Indeed, if Moses’ encounter with God was glorious, then what we all experience now, as God puts his Spirit in our hearts, is ‘surpassing glory’ (v10), glory which ultimately lasts forever (v11).

Wow! What an amazing thought to end our week. Glory is shorthand for the manifest presence of God – and, thanks to Christ, this presence is now in *our* hearts, bringing us life, and growing these beautiful qualities in us. Today, why not pray for those qualities to keep growing in you – and for grace to keep tasting God’s glory at work in your life.

Day 9 – 2 Corinthians 3:12-16 'The veil removed'

Back when Alise and I used to work for the same company, one of the highlights of the year was the Company Sports Day. Before you get notions of some sort of serious competition, this was more It's a Knockout than Diamond League Athletics. Events included the Space Hopper Relay, welly wanging, egg and spoon race, you get the idea!

The last event each year was the biggest and most chaotic of all. It was a relay race, where all participants had to run to the end of the course, put a blindfold on, spin on a stick ten times and then try to run back to their team. The team would help them find their way back by shouting out – so each participant had to listen carefully for the voice which enabled them to get home. As you can imagine, the fun was in the fact that people were so dizzy they usually ran off at an angle of 45 degrees, before falling over in comic fashion. One particularly memorable year Alise ran very fast at an oblique angle straight into the managing director, knocking him into the sandpit. But I digress.

Thankfully I don't remember anyone actually getting hurt – but in a way I think that race feels a lot like life to most of us. The first decade feels pretty straightforward; then from secondary school and on through our adult lives, it all gets much trickier. We feel disorientated, bewildered at the complexity of life, which seems to keep spinning us round. Many of us have no idea where we're going most of the time – and even if we do, if can feel daunting trying to get there, like running blindfold and dizzy in a crowd of other blindfolded dizzy people....

Yesterday, we used this image to think about the importance of which voice to listen to (that would be Jesus'). Today, however, our focus switches to the blindfold – or, as the passage says, the veil. This veil is like a covering of spiritual blindness. St Paul indicates that this veil applies to many of his compatriots who were still in thrall to the Old Covenant – trying to keep a law which time and again had proved beyond them (v14). Indeed, this is not a new problem: more than a thousand years previously, Moses' own face had to be veiled after he had seen God, as it carried the unfiltered glory of the Divine Presence (v13).

What was the answer? As you might expect, it is Jesus! Jesus is the one who gives us access to God's presence. Jesus can do what even Moses can't, because by his death he has atoned for everything that separates us from God; and by his resurrection, he has won new life – a second chance, even a new 'birth', as John's gospel describes – for all who put their trust in him. It is Jesus who reveals God's presence to us: so the veil is taken away in both senses – we are no longer unable to approach God (v16), nor left in the dark about who God is (v14).

Today, give thanks that Jesus allows you to see God as he is – that our veils have been taken away. And pray for grace to keep seeing Jesus clearly this week, and to live in the glorious light of his presence.

Day 10 – 2 Corinthians 3:16-18 'True freedom'

What is freedom? It's a good question to ask: and it's one which, in our culture, is currently skewed heavily towards the idea of individualism. Google it and you'll find the Cambridge English Dictionary defines it primarily as: 'the condition or right of being able or allowed to do, say, think, etc. whatever you want to, without being controlled or limited'. Wikipedia adds a dimension of self-fulfilment: 'Freedom is understood as either having the ability to act or change without constraint, or to possess the power and resources to fulfil one's purposes.'

It's interesting that many newspapers tried to label the ending of Covid restrictions in 2021 as 'Freedom Day' – which, given the definitions noted above, fits exactly into the dominant strain of 'freedom thinking' in our culture, which is essentially freedom *to*...

But this is quite a limited view of freedom, especially if my freedom interferes with someone else's. 'Freedom to' might work well for me – but in doing so, it might act as a constraint on others. My freedom to jump a queue is someone else's constraint to wait longer!

Today's passage gets to grips with the biblical idea of freedom, and begins with the assertion that true freedom is found in the Spirit: 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.' (v17) What does this freedom look like?

In the bible, you'll find two other sorts of freedoms emphasised much more heavily: one is freedom *from*.... guilt, shame, the weight of our or others' expectations, the fear of death, the fear of failure, the need to earn our salvation – and more! Here, this 'freedom from' is expressed in even more fundamental terms: freedom from the fear of meeting God face-to-face. Before Christ, this is something no human could risk – but now, thanks to Jesus, we can all come directly into God's presence: 'with unveiled faces' as the text puts it (v18). The Spirit is God's down-payment in our lives; and, safe in the knowledge that God is already with us – even *in* us – we no longer have any barriers to access. How amazing is that?

But there's another freedom, just as vital, perhaps even more so – freedom *for*... We are set free by Jesus for transformation into his image, to become the humans we were always designed to be. This comes about partly simply by giving time to be with the Lord (as the first half of v18 makes clear) – but it is also an active process of co-operating with the Spirit. As the freedom-giving Spirit works in our lives, so we become more like Jesus. This process happens 'with ever increasing glory'.

As you got out of bed today, or looked at yourself in the mirror, you probably didn't feel increasing glory – I didn't either! But it is the true spiritual reality. Today, pray for God to help you live in true freedom: from all that blocks your peace, joy and spiritual growth, and for a transformed life which blesses others. And pray it with confidence, because it's what the Lord desires for all of us.

Day 11 – 2 Corinthians 4:1-2 ‘Plain truth’

They say that truth is the first casualty of war. I recently watched a fascinating documentary about the origins of fake news – so prevalent in our consciousness nowadays. Perhaps not surprisingly, it’s been around a lot longer than we think; and it was noticeable that times of conflict were often the places where stories were most often embellished, exaggerated, or just plain invented to fuel the success of the mission. It is a common feeling that in exceptional times, the ends justify the means.

But what about the spiritual battle? Do the ends justify the means, when what’s at stake is the kingdom of God? Every age faces a contest of ideas, such that the good news of Jesus is always ‘competing’ with lots of other claims... and bear in mind that the first generation of Christians expected Jesus to return in their lifetime: given the urgency, surely a few (what we would call) sales techniques are acceptable? Don’t we want heaven to be as full as possible?

The clear answer of the New Testament is ‘no’ – *how* we do things ultimately matters more than the outcome it achieves. Jesus’ moral teaching always focuses on the heart – our motives, our integrity – and so perceived success in external areas is no substitute for what’s going on inside us. Indeed, many of the images Jesus uses for the kingdom are designed to make it look as insignificant as possible: the mustard seed, the yeast, the narrow path, the eye of a needle. Words like ‘success’ tend to sound a bit hollow when viewed through these lenses.

This kind of teaching is undoubtedly very much in Paul’s mind when he begins chapter 4 in our passage today. Still thinking about those wandering teachers (2:17), he contrasts what a real Christ-centred teaching ministry looks like. Its ultimate goal is simply to ‘set forth the truth plainly’ (v2).

It avoids temptations which are still just as appealing nowadays: to lead a double life, preaching one thing but living another (‘secret and shameful ways’); to lie about the benefits of following Jesus (‘deception’) – of which there are many, but we can always add a few to make it even more appealing! And finally, to twist any bits in the gospel we don’t like so it fits more smoothly with the sort of easy faith or lifestyle we’d like, or indeed so that it excludes other people we don’t like (‘distorting the Word of God’).

This text carries a deep sense of awe for me personally. Every time I sit down to write a Daily Inspiration (or a Sunday sermon or any piece of Christian communication) my goal is to try and live out Paul’s benchmark: to teach ‘plain truth’ as honestly and as openly as I can. To lift hearts without cutting corners; to reveal the beauty and glory of Jesus without getting in the way myself.

On behalf of all who dare to try and communicate the immense love of Christ to our world, can I ask for your prayers to stay true to this calling, to keep Paul’s vision of ‘plain truth’ alive? And as you pray for us (and thank you to all of you who do!), let’s all pray for ourselves, to be those whose hearts remain open to the full revelation of Jesus’ beautiful good news.

Day 12 – 2 Corinthians 4:3-6 ‘Blind to the light’

About 20 years ago I remember standing on Blackfriars Bridge watching a full solar eclipse. Such things happen very rarely in our country, and I remember at the time it was the cause of much excitement. Almost everyone filed out of the office and onto the bridge; and even though it was the middle of the day, it was distinctly eerie watching the land go dark. For a few minutes, a summer’s day felt like dusk – before becoming summer again. (As an aside, I didn’t give myself proper eye protection, and had spots in my vision for hours – naughty boy!)

A full eclipse is a brilliant image for today’s passage: only this time the brilliant light is that of the Son, not the sun. This divine light shines in the face of Christ (v6) which in turns shines into our hearts (also v6). It is a light which was there from the beginning of time, and is now revealed to all people.

However, not everyone ‘sees’ it. Many people, Paul acknowledges, remain ‘blind’ to it (v4). This is not just random, or accidental: we have a spiritual enemy, whose primary purpose is to try and make this happen. Paul calls him ‘the god of this age’, which is shorthand for the devil – so-called because his power is limited, both in terms of extent (small ‘g’!) and time (this age only).

Where does the devil try to work? Primarily in our *minds* (v4). This is about truth – and indeed about the opposite of truth. Sadly, we humans are prone to believing lies: about God, about ourselves, about Jesus. Such things sink into our minds, and act like an eclipse; they get in the way of the Son, so we cannot see his brilliant glory. In short, they block the light.

But let’s notice that the light still shines. Even if people might be blind to it, it is not any less brilliant. I might draw the curtains on a sunny day, but it doesn’t mean the sun isn’t shining! An eclipse makes things darker, but not pitch-black. And so, too, even those we might think are ‘blind’ to the light and love of Jesus are never totally beyond hope, or change.

That’s why Paul is so committed to ‘setting forth the truth plainly’, as we saw yesterday, and thereby ‘commending ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.’ Truth matters. Truth has power. Indeed, as Jesus says, it is the *truth* that sets us free. But prayer also helps – prayer unlocks hearts and minds: just as it did for Paul’s original readers, so it still does. Why not pray today for someone you know and love who tends to resist Jesus – that the light would keep shining, and that eventually that veil would melt away!

Day 13 – 2 Corinthians 4:7-12 ‘Treasure in clay jars’

Early in 1947 two young Bedouin shepherds were idling away the hours in a remote part of the north shore of the Dead Sea in Israel. They were throwing stones into caves to enjoy the sound they made when clattering into the empty caverns. Throwing into one cave, they noticed that the sound made was more of a dull thud.

Intrigued, they climbed up to explore the cave, and found some old jars – which are what the stones must have been hitting. These jars appeared to have some old manuscripts in them. The shepherds didn't know what to do with them, so they took them back to their family and hung the scrolls out on tent poles while they decided. Their tribe couldn't agree either, but after a while they were persuaded to try and sell them to a local dealer. The first one they approached in Bethlehem told them they were worthless and returned them. The second paid a few dollars for some of the scrolls, before then re-selling them: and eventually they caught the eye of a scholar, who recognised an ancient text on one of them... and the rest, as they say, is history.

It turns out that these 'worthless' items were in fact the (now world-famous) Dead Sea Scrolls. They contain some of the oldest manuscripts of biblical books, as well as other writings from the period, and are now considered to be one of the most important archaeological finds in history. Treasure in jars of clay, indeed.

...all of which segues neatly to today's passage. The image which forms the heart of the text is one of the most loved in the New Testament, because it captures perfectly what many of us instinctively know to be true. The gospel is the greatest treasure in the world, something whose light we carry around with us in our hearts (as we saw yesterday). This gospel is not just beautiful and true, it is also unbreakable; however, we ourselves are constantly aware of how fragile we are. Like jars of clay, we might look strong on the outside, but we are easily broken.

It is a powerful metaphor for the 'now and not yet' of the Christian life. We are already citizens of heaven; we have a hope and a guaranteed future. But life is hard: we are often hard-pressed or perplexed, occasionally even persecuted. We often wish that our lives were stronger: if only we were steel jars, not clay ones! But, Paul says, there's a reason for our fragility – it reminds us that the saving power is all God's, not ours (v7). We don't rely on ourselves, but on our unshakeable, unbreakable God.

Consequently, we can overcome the challenges we face (vv8-9) because it's not all about us. We don't face them alone, or try to defeat them in our own strength, but rather we rest on the all-surpassing strength of God, who enables us not to be crushed, abandoned or left in despair. *Life* is always at work in us – praise God!

Today, give thanks for this treasure that lives in your heart. And pray for any on your heart – others or yourself – to know the truth of these verses. By God's grace (and God's alone), we will overcome.

Day 14 – 2 Corinthians 4:13-15 'The spirit of faith'

Christians are usually called 'people of faith'. Faith lies at the heart of who we are. But it's easily misunderstood: so often faith is reduced to something that lives in our head – acknowledgement of a set of principles or beliefs.

Not so with Paul – in today's passage he makes two striking comments, which form a great way to end our week. The first is that, for him, faith is something he can't keep quiet about: 'we believe, and *therefore* speak' (v13). The 'therefore' is interesting, isn't it? The one follows the other. Faith is something he has to pass on.

Now, you might say that he is called to preach: so that's something for him, but maybe not for everyone? Perhaps so – but what is healthy about this mentality is the sense that faith is active – it *leads* somewhere. For Paul, to believe is to live, to communicate, to enable others to be blessed by it, that 'thanksgiving [might] overflow to the glory of God' (v17).

The second striking thing about this short text is that, whilst Paul is talking about the spirit of faith, what he says in v14 is that 'we *know* that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus'. For Paul, faith is not just wishful thinking, but something firm, concrete: a solid foundation for real hope.

And what a hope! Jesus' resurrection was not a one-off, but the first of a countless number of resurrections, which all of his followers will also enjoy. We will be raised with Jesus! Hallelujah!

As we finish a week of deep teaching from this letter, let this simple truth lift your heart today: however you feel, whatever life is throwing at the moment, you *will* be raised with Jesus. And may that cause thanksgiving to overflow in your heart, too.

Day 15 – 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 'Inwardly renewed'

One of the great privileges of my work is being able to visit people who are near to the end of their lives. This might sound morbid, but to be given the opportunity to spend time with someone who does not have much time is something to be treasured. Sometimes those visits are very demanding – at other times, I feel as if I have been the one blessed by the occasion, not the other way round.

This is particularly true of the visits I have made to some of our very elderly saints: wonderful women and men who have walked with the Lord for most of their lives. We have been blessed to have a number of 90-somethings in our congregations, many of whom we have lost in recent years. With some of these amazing people I have been particularly conscious of the contrast St Paul makes here between our outward physical circumstances and our inner lives. I have sat beside a very frail body which is quite literally shrinking with every visit – and yet also looked into eyes which radiated light, peace and joy. The body may be wasting away, but the spirit is as bright and brilliant as ever – and ready for what lies beyond.

Although this sharp contrast between our physical and spiritual realities is most obvious near the end of our lives, it is a universal truth for all of humanity. Our bodies don't last for ever – little by little they wear out. But this is not the whole picture: we are made for eternity, for fullness of life; and so, in Christ, our spirits reflect a different reality. God is gently flooding them with his life and love – renewing us day by day.

This places a very different perspective on the trajectory of our lives. It is not 'all downhill from here'. Whilst that might be true in the physical sense, there is something else happening at the same time. Our spirits are growing, thanks to the activity of God in our lives. We are slowly learning how to live in heaven *before* we die.

This puts the difficulties of our lives in perspective: what Paul lived with were far from 'light and momentary troubles' (v17 : see chapter 6, verses 3-10 for his summary) – but, in view of his eternal future, he knew that this was not the whole story; indeed these challenges were shaping him for eternal glory.

So, today and this week, let's take Paul's advice and fix our eyes on the prize (v18), and pray that God's beautiful Spirit might refresh us and renew us day by day (v16). And may that daily renewing enable us to live joyfully and peacefully in the strong and unshakeable kingdom of God this week.

Day 16 – 2 Corinthians 5:1-5 ‘Our heavenly dwelling’

As many of you know, our family has long enjoyed camping. As I get older, increasingly I’m not sure why! The body doesn’t cope as well with the outdoor life as it used to.... but looking back to the golden days – and nostalgia isn’t what it used to be, is it – when the sun shone in an early summer’s evening, and we were sat in our chairs outside the tent enjoying a glass of wine while the kids played and the birdsong caressed the treetops, there really is nothing like it.

That said, our first ever trip as a family didn’t start well. The first night we pitched a tent it rained solidly from midnight. At 9am we were shivering at a bus stop desperately waiting for a bus to Corfe Castle and wondering why on earth we’d decided to bring a 4- and 2-year old on this mad escapade. Similarly there was a notorious week in 2009 when it rained for most of 5 days and on the 6th night the chap pitched next to us was digging a trench round his tent. We agreed that if the water got inside ours (it hadn’t... yet) it was game over and we would go home a day early. No pain, no gain.

And that’s the point, really. The fragility of camping is both its great challenge and its joy. A tent compared to a house is a totally different beast. It moves with every gust of wind, and even light rain patters loudly on the fabric structure. At the end of ch4, St Paul started reflecting on the difference between life now and the life we’re heading for in heaven. Today he develops that theme to reflect honestly on our bodies: what they are like now and what they will become in glory.

And the comparison he makes is between a tent and a house. Our bodies here he describes as an ‘earthly tent’ (v1). As images go, it’s a good one – our bodies carry that same fragility: the seams leak, they struggle with extremes, basically they wear out. In heaven it will be different: our resurrected bodies are described by Paul as ‘an eternal house... a heavenly dwelling.’ What was once weak will be strong (for more detail, flick back to 1 Corinthians 15:42-49) – to use a fabulous phrase in this passage, all our frailties and limitations will be ‘swallowed up by life’ (v4). Life wins. And this vibrant, electric, eternal life will course endlessly through our renewed and perfected veins.

It interesting that Paul at this point reminds us that the Spirit is the down-payment on all this (as he did in 1:22) – and it’s fitting that he does, because the Spirit leads us towards things that never fade or perish: love, joy, peace, hope, faith. Such things might appear intangible, but deep down we all know that in this life they are the only things that really matter, that are really *real*. Possessions come and go, health is often inconsistent – but these virtues are eternal. And they pave the way for that eternal reality, that ‘eternal house’ we will one day eventually enjoy.

So today, give thanks that we have this hope to look forward to. And pray for more of eternity – love, joy, peace, hope faith – to fill your earthly life today.

Day 17 – 2 Corinthians 5:6-10 'Home and away'

As I write this, tonight my football team plays in a huge play-off game, the winner of which will play at Wembley at the end of May. By the time you read this, I'll either be eating my breakfast toast with a big, smug grin on my face or will be staring wistfully into my early morning cuppa!

It's the second part of a tie played over two legs: on Saturday we were away, and tonight we're at home. Received wisdom is that the home team has an advantage, so we are strong favourites to progress, because being at home is usually better than being away. Though that never gives a football fan much cause for optimism!

St Paul knew nothing about football, but he did use the home and away image to great effect in this passage, and with the same idea at the back of his mind: being home is better than being away. But where is our real home? At the moment, our temporary home is here on earth – which means that we don't yet have the full reality of what it will mean to be 'away' with the Lord forever (v6). However, if this is the first leg of the play-off tie, there is a second leg to come, when we will be at home with the Lord (v8), which is much, much better. And, in this play-off, the first leg on earth is considerably shorter than the second in glory, which thankfully stretches for eternity.

We all live with this tension between the 'now' and the 'not yet' of our spiritual lives. Even at its best, what we have now can only be a foretaste of what is to come. It's easy to lose sight of that: to imagine that what we have now is as good as it can be, like the child at a restaurant who gets excited by the starter and forgets that not only the main course, but the unlimited ice-cream sundae machine, is yet to come!

So how do we live with this tension? St Paul gives us two very simple but practical bits of advice: first, we live by faith, not by sight (v7). Our home here is temporary: we might not see the eternal home yet, but we've exchanged binding contracts. The fact that we haven't moved there yet doesn't make it any less real, or permanent.

Second, wherever we are, we make it our goal to please the Lord (v9). We keep the main thing the main thing: Jesus first, and trust God for the rest. This is what gives us confidence in our faith (and Paul is so keen to encourage us to be confident he emphasises this twice – v6 and v8), and enables us live 'home and away'. And may God grant us all grace for the away leg, in hope of the glorious home leg to come. Amen!

Day 18 – 2 Corinthians 5:11-15 'The power of the unseen'

I can't see the wind, but I can its effects. After the drama of the big storms last winter (and two massive boughs crashing in the churchyard right by our wall), over the last few weeks the energy of the wind has been at work in more gentle ways: as I've sat at my desk, I've enjoyed all kinds of blossoms, various plant seeds and pollen drifting in gentle snow across my vision, and occasionally glistening and glittering in the sunlight.

The idea that what is unseen powers what is seen lies at the heart of our passage today. In fact, Paul has been meditating on the contrast between 'seen' and 'unseen' for much of the last dozen or more verses, and the importance of keeping our eyes fixed on the powerful spiritual realities which are unseen; but in verses 11-15 he fixes his attention on this 'unseen vs seen' theme in two specific ways.

The first you might call the wrong focus. Paul has critics – especially in Corinth – and these critics are quick to point out that Paul's public speaking skills are not that impressive by the (high) standard of Greek oratory. (As an aside, it's quite a thought that the greatest evangelist the church has ever had wasn't much of a public speaker!) These critics want more flourishes, more pizzazz, they want to *see* a better show.... and Paul is having none of it. 'They take pride in what is seen,' he says (v12) – but what matters is what is in the heart. Paul's ministry is powerful and effective because of what is going on *inside* him: the heart of love and passion for Christ which fuels everything he does, and which God in turn blesses. What is unseen is what matters.

This then can be applied to Paul's ministry more generally, as he references twice in this passage. What is unseen is what powers the 'seen' in Paul's life and mission: his reverence for God energises him to 'persuade' people of the gospel (v11); later, he says that it is Christ's love which 'compels' him – and what an insightful word that is, too – to preach that Christ died for all and was raised again (vv14-15).

Paul is a very visible figure in the church – even today. But what empowers him is what's deep inside his heart: Christ's love, and his reverence for God in return. We may not be Pauls, but it's not a bad pair of values to sit inside our hearts too. May Christ's love fill our hearts with reverence and passion for him, and may that flow out into our lives in all kinds of ways – that what is unseen may shape and transform what is seen in us today.

Day 19 – 2 Corinthians 5:15-17 ‘New creations!’

When I was growing up, turning on a television set and making it work was a much more demanding experience than it is now. I remember that we had an old Ferguson (remember them?) black and white model that required tuning in the TV channels on a dial, and also had a circular wire aerial which had to be moved around on its base to get the best reception. If there was a thunderstorm, you had no chance... I don't expect anyone misses those days – though it had to be said that there was a sense of achievement when you got a good picture!

One thing that often came with old TV sets was a series of dials – not just volume, but brightness and contrast. Most TVs still have these, but hardly any of us use them, as the automatic settings do the job for us. It's the contrast one that's relevant for us today. A good TV picture should not just be in focus, and bright enough to watch in the daytime – the image also needs a good contrast, so that all the elements of the image are clearly distinguished from one another.

Over the last two chapters, Paul's letter has largely been about a series of contrasts. He began by thinking about the Old and New Covenants in ch3, and what he terms the critical contrast between the age of the law (or letter) and the age of the Spirit. He then develops this idea to describe the contrast between the fragility of our humanity (both our bodies and souls) and the powerful life-giving message we carry inside of us (ch4 vs1-12). This in turn leads him to draw the contrast between what we see now and the unseen glory that awaits us (4:16-5:10). Since we have to keep trusting in the realities that are to come, 'we live by faith, not by sight'.

All these contrasts are powerful ways of describing the nature of the spiritual life, and how we reconcile our life here on earth with what is to come. I hope you've found each of these helpful over the last couple of weeks. But at this point in the text, Paul gets to the very heart of the matter: the *source* of all of these contrasts. All of these 'before and after' contrasts rest ultimately on one pivotal event in history: the resurrection of Jesus (v15). The age of the Spirit is only possible after the resurrection, since Christ is now alive and can pour out his Spirit to all who trust in him. The life-giving light which shines in our hearts does so because Jesus has been raised from the dead, conquering the darkness of sin and death. The glories of what is to come are possible because Christ offers all those who follow him the gift of eternal life, with resurrected bodies.

When we come to Christ we join with him in both his death (v14) and his resurrection (v15). So our old self (and its sin) has died with him; our new selves are raised with him. All of which leads to this glorious summary in v17: 'If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!' The ultimate contrast: in Christ *we are made new*. Renewed by the gospel; renewed by the Spirit, the indwelling presence of Christ; renewed for eternity and fullness of resurrection life.

I don't know about you, but I don't always feel like a new creation! But take heart – whatever you feel, seize this amazing truth today: thanks to Jesus you *are* a new creation. Keep reminding yourself of it, and let it sink deep into your soul. And may God grant us all grace to live, 'not for ourselves but for him' (v15) this week.

Day 20 – 2 Corinthians 5:17-20 'Reconciliation'

As we continue to bask in the glorious verse where we ended yesterday – this amazing truth that in Christ we are new creations – Paul switches tack today. If it was Jesus' resurrection that ultimately led to us becoming new creations (following in Jesus' footsteps), Paul now goes a step further back by thinking about what Jesus' death effected for us.

In essence: to use the language of a conflict, if the resurrection is the 'rebuilding plan' after the conflict, the cross is the peace treaty which ended it. Our selfishness has always been the thing that acts as a barrier between us and God – we have 'sins which count against us' and these need to be dealt with. Here Paul doesn't go into *how* Jesus death does this – he touches on it tomorrow and in much more detail elsewhere – he simply observes that this peace with God *has been achieved* through Christ, such that whatever existed as a barrier between us and God, whatever 'counted against us', has been removed.

In other words, thanks to Jesus, we are reconciled to God! There are few things in life as wonderful as a successful reconciliation. Whatever caused the rift in the first place, such rifts cause us to feel all kinds of negative emotions: fear, anxiety, perhaps a little self-righteousness, too. We want to make up, but are not sure how. Who makes the first move? Who says what, and when?

Thankfully, when it comes to our relationship to God, the gloriously liberating news is that *it is God who always makes the first move*. He is always more keen to be reconciled to us than we are to him, whatever the cost to him. Like the father waiting on the edge of his land for the prodigal child to come home, God longs for our company like a lovesick parent, desperately waiting and hoping with the helplessness of deep and abiding love.

This is the heart of our gospel. And it is a continuing process: note the use of the word 'reconciling' in v19 – it remains an ongoing process. God raises up people to keep sharing this message in every generation. In the first century AD St Paul was one of those 'ministers of reconciliation' (v18 – and what a lovely job title!). But the task is as important as ever today: how the world needs more reconciliation – not just between people, but also with the Lord, too.

In our small ways, we too are ambassadors for Christ (v20). We represent him to the world. So today, give thanks that, because of Jesus, you are wonderfully reconciled to God! And pray for grace to represent Jesus well to those around you – to be an ambassador, a minister of reconciliation.

Day 21 – 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2 ‘Now is the time’

‘Come, now is the time to worship...’ This is one of my favourite worship songs – but it’s somewhat polarising. I know some people who object to its theology: surely it’s always time to worship, and therefore it’s a meaningless phrase to sing? Does it in fact encourage a false view that, because we sing it in church, somehow we worship God more in certain places than in the rest of our lives?

At one level it’s a fair argument to make; but it also misses the counter-point: precisely because this moment – ‘now’ – is *always* the time to worship, then we can always sing it truthfully, and lift our hearts to God. We can sing it in church – but also in our kitchen or even in the shower! Because *now* is the time to worship – to honour God and yield our hearts to him.

St Paul makes a similar case today. As a ‘minister of reconciliation’ he is always calling people back to the Lord, to worship Jesus. That’s his job title, his calling: he can’t help himself, even with people he knows are largely reconciled to God – he says it again to them quite directly (v20). It is, no doubt, a message he has shared many, many times with them.

But he knows there’s also a bigger thing at play here. Yes, the Corinthian Christians have been reconciled to God: but this letter is written in a context when, currently, they are not reconciled either to him or to each other. There are people badmouthing Paul and his ministry, and the church is still hurting from a very painful pastoral situation which Paul spent much of the first part of the letter trying to address and to heal.

So his message is not just: ‘be reconciled to God’ (v20); it’s also ‘we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain’ (v1). In other words: being reconciled to God is absolutely amazing, but it’s just the start. God’s grace is meant to seep into all your other relationships. We are to be people of reconciliation – as far as we can be, anyway.

Grace is not just a one-time gift: it is an ongoing process of renewal. We live from grace, yes – but also in grace and through grace. Grace does not just secure our destinies, it also shapes our lives. That doesn’t mean that sometimes we don’t have hard tasks to do, or hard things to say – as Paul has had to do here with the church in Corinth – but in the end, grace always wins.

And because grace is a daily gift of God, an ongoing presence in our lives, Paul can finish this section of his letter by reminding them that ‘now is the time of God’s favour, now is the day of salvation.’ You may have received grace long ago; you may have struggled with parts of your life recently; you may be battling with unanswered prayer or challenging relationships. Take heart: *now* is the time of God’s favour – because in the kingdom of God, grace is always available to us now. Not just in the past, nor just in the glorious future that awaits us – but now.

Come, now is the time to worship. Come, now is the time to give your heart. Come, just as you are to worship. Come, just as you are before your God. Come.

Day 22 – 2 Corinthians 6:3-13 ‘Nothing – and everything’

This reflection was first posted on Ascension Day – one of the great but somewhat overlooked festivals of the Christian year. It’s that moment when we celebrate Jesus ascending into heaven forty days after his resurrection, returning to his Father after his time on earth. And at sight, today’s passage might seem to be an odd fit for a day like today. It jars a little, doesn’t it? What has Paul’s very candid description of what his life looks like as a witness for Christ got to do with the glory of Jesus’ ascension?

More than we might think! The answer lies in what the angels say to the disciples after Jesus has returned to heaven: ‘Why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.’ (Acts 1:11)

In other words, you could paraphrase what the angels say to Jesus’ friends as: ‘don’t just stand there – Jesus has given you a job to do, now get on and do it before he comes back!’

It turns out that this job for many of the first generation of Jesus’ followers looked a lot like what Paul describes here in today’s passage. A life of humble service and severe opposition – just, indeed, like their Lord’s. Many understood what it meant for Jesus to call them to ‘take up their cross and follow him’ in sadly all too literal ways.

And yet, despite the hardship, despite the opposition, despite all the obstacles and challenges, this small band of 120 who waited and prayed for the Holy Spirit after Jesus ascended had, by a reasonable estimate, seen 10% of the population of the Roman Empire come to follow this same Jesus by the time the Emperor Constantine made it all more respectable in 312AD – that would be approximately 20 million people, or 167,000 times more souls than when the church started 300 years previously.

It is a quite extraordinary achievement, and Paul testifies to what made it possible: ‘in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand in the left’ (vv6-7); and through unconditional commitment in every circumstance: ‘through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report’ (v8).

This was not ultimately a work of the human spirit – though it did need the heroism of humans willing to co-operate with God – it is a work of the Spirit of Christ, promised at the Ascension and poured out on all believers at Pentecost. Paul may have had little idea just how big, how global this movement would become, but he certainly knew something of that anointing of the Spirit – hence he could conclude this remarkable monologue (and one can sense here a little riposte to those who arrogantly said he wasn’t much good with words – just look at this soaring text!) by testifying that he is ‘sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor yet making many rich; having nothing and yet possessing everything.’

So as we worship our ascended Lord today, give thanks for the courage of those people like Paul who have spread our Lord’s good news throughout the world; and above all, give thanks (and keep praying) for the gift of the Spirit that empowered his – and our – lives. By the grace of Christ, we still possess everything.

Day 23 – 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 ‘Set apart’

When our kids were much younger I remember hiring a couple of pedalo boats when we were on holiday. Alise and I paired off with one of our children and enjoyed a fun half hour going round in circles! The problem with pedalo boats is that you need roughly equal pedal power to go anywhere: if one side pushes harder than the other, you veer off course. Pair an adult with a 6 year old and what happens next is enormous fun, but a total disaster in terms of making any progress!

Today’s reading is one of those tough passages which has had an enormous impact on the church’s life, but makes for uncomfortable reading. It seems to draw the lines between Christians and everyone else very sharply indeed. What are we to make of it 2,000 years later?

First, let’s acknowledge that this is a very young church in a very venal culture. Corinth was a byword for moral excess, even then: to ‘Corinthianise’ was a slang term in Greek culture for licentious or immoral behaviour. First century Corinth makes modern-day Las Vegas look prudish and strict by comparison.

The challenges faced by this tiny group of believers, then, were extreme. And if we go back to Paul’s first letter, we find him reminding them that their commitment to holiness did not mean they had to withdraw completely from the world (1 Cor 5:9-11). So we can reasonably infer that his more hardline advice in today’s passage is given because they did not listen to his previous advice, and the problems of moral compromise had only got worse.

It is helpful to see the fundamental question of how much Christians should ‘live apart’ from the world as a spectrum or continuum, rather than two ‘camps’. At one end of this spectrum is complete separation from the world in every respect; at the other is complete integration, so that the church looks no different to the rest of the world. All of us have to work out where on this spectrum to be, in order to be both spiritually healthy and effective in mission and witness. Clearly, at the time of this letter, the Corinthian church was too far toward one end of the spectrum – so their pedalo was going round in circles? – and needed to reset their perspective.

Another helpful way to evaluate this conundrum is to think of flow. The point of the church is that the values of Jesus’ kingdom flow from it out to the rest of the world. On the other hand, if the flow reverses, and the values of a godless world flow into the church, then we need to worry. What St Paul is ultimately challenging his readers in Corinth to do is to reverse the flow. They needed to renew their own personal holiness (and the word holy means ‘set apart’), so that Jesus’ kingdom values of mutual love, grace, unity, hope and, yes, purity would flow into the culture around them.

As we sit with this teaching today, why not take a few minutes to ask yourself: which way is the flow working in my life? Is anything unhealthy from my relationship with the world around me flowing into my life? How can the Christlike things I hold dear flow out towards others? As we reflect, let’s take heart that we are sons and daughters of the living God (v18): this loving, divine Parent will graciously help us in whatever we resolve.

Day 24 – 2 Corinthians 7:1-3 ‘Room in our hearts’

It’s amazing how easy it is to accumulate stuff without noticing. Alise and I have noticed with some alarm over the years how every time we move, the removal lorry we need gets larger. That’s partly because our kids have grown – but the more unsettling truth is that we own more than we used to. When we moved into our current house almost nine years ago everything fitted comfortably; now we look around at piles in corners and wonder how we didn’t notice! It’s time for us to have a clear out, to make some room again.

What’s true for houses, it turns out, is also true for our spiritual lives. It’s easy for them to get ‘cluttered’ – clogged up by baggage of various sorts. The reasons are numerous: doubts which nag away at us; bad experiences which shake our faith; times when God seems distant; sometimes it’s just wilful distraction – the journey of faith seems too hard and we try to justify a bit of ‘time off’ to ourselves.

The result is a cluttered inner life. Our hearts get full of other things, and the Lord – including our day-to-day walk with our Lord – gets squeezed. The church in Corinth was certainly battling with a bit of this ‘cluttering’. They were beset by divisions and unhealthy life choices: St Paul had called them out on it, and instead of heeding his advice they had continued down a destructive path, turning on themselves and even on Paul himself.

In the end, a certain amount of order had been restored – but there were still scars, and some who still wanted to ‘shoot the messenger’, feeling a lingering resentment toward Paul. To these, in today’s passage Paul offers a heartfelt plea: ‘Make room for us in your hearts.’ (v2) We haven’t wronged, corrupted or exploited anyone, he says. I only ever wanted what was best for you: your healing and flourishing as individual believers and as a Christian community.

The remedy he suggests is actually in the verse before (and this is where subdivisions in the text added by translators can be unhelpful). He has just been advocating a spiritual clear-out: a re-dedication of their lives to God (v1). This renewal of purity will not only restore their relationships with God and each other, and maybe their credibility to those looking in – it will also ‘create space’ to renew their friendship with Paul. So verse 1 leads naturally to verse 2.

As we look at our own lives, what ‘clearing out’ is needed? What is cluttering our lives and our relationship to God? And, as we re-dedicate ourselves, is there anyone we need to make room for again? Take a few moments today to give yourself a little ‘spiritual spring clean’ – and as we do that, take heart that ‘we have these promises’ (v1) always to cling on to. Our great God is cheering us on.

Day 25 – 2 Corinthians 7:4-7 ‘Pride and joy’

Many years ago, when our kids were little, I remember putting them to bed at their usual hour. Our youngest would have been about three years old and as I said goodnight he suddenly looked up at me and said: ‘Daddy, are you proud of me?’ It seemed to come from nowhere, and to be honest I’ve no idea what prompted it that day. I wouldn’t even have known that ‘pride’ was a concept he had already lodged in his mind. ‘Of course! I’m very proud of you,’ was my reply – but, as I went downstairs, parenting inevitably felt a bigger responsibility than ever...

We all need someone, or people, who are proud of us. And not just when we’re children, either: the great American singer-songwriter Brandi Carlile – not to be confused with Belinda! (though who doesn’t love ‘Heaven is a place on earth’?) – recorded a haunting song in her mid-20s about coming to terms with the death of her father when she was just 12. The chorus ends with this heartfelt cry: ‘Do I make you proud? Do you get me now? Am I your pride and joy?’

As we’ve seen throughout this series, the church in Corinth had been going through a tough time: largely of its own making, but nevertheless, the scars were deep. Their founder and mentor, St Paul, had had to say some hard things to them – but now, in today’s passage, he wants to remind them of how much he loves them. And more than that, like any loving parent, he wants to tell them how *proud* he is of them: ‘I take great pride in you!’ he says in v4. When he discovers from Titus (v6) how much they wanted to be reconciled to him (most of them, anyway), he is moved to share in v7: ‘my joy was greater than ever.’

This young church, for all its faults, was Paul’s pride and joy. He didn’t just care for them, or support them, or teach them – he took pride in them, he found great joy in them. I think there’s something here for us in our church communities. We may or may not be in a position of leadership like Paul, but I don’t think that matters, we can still cheer our fellow believers on. When they do something good for Christ, or make progress in something, why not tell them that you’re proud of them, or that their achievement brings you joy too?

As an aside, we might find that finding our pride and joy in others might make us less prone to selfish pride in ourselves; and also make it more likely that others will encourage us in return. That’s the way the kingdom works – praise God!

So maybe today, take a moment to encourage someone – even if it wouldn’t yet be right to say that they are your pride and joy, an outpouring of encouragement can only serve to create communities which can truly be just that: our pride and joy.

Day 26 – 2 Corinthians 7:8-12 'Fruitful sorrow'

The aftermath of any fall-out is not always what we'd like it to be. I'm sure you can think of times when you messed up, and conflict came about as a result. You probably felt sadness afterwards – and perhaps other emotions, too: shame, guilt, a desire to put things right. Or maybe (sometimes) a sense of injustice or wounded pride! We're human, and complex.

As you know by now, this letter was occasioned by some painful stuff going on in the church in Corinth. St Paul has addressed this in numerous ways – but now he gets to what you might call 'the spiritual aftershocks' of the affair. He has had to bluntly challenge some unacceptable behaviour – and now he talks about the consequences in terms of what's been going on in the hearts and souls of his readers.

He acknowledges quite openly that what he had to say has caused sorrow (v8); but at this point he draws a very helpful distinction between two types of sorrow. The first is the self-pitying kind – the sort that feels less like 'I'm sorry' than 'I'm sorry I got caught' or 'I'm sorry you didn't like it.' Paul calls this 'worldly sorrow' (v9b) because it ultimately isn't really being sorry at all – it certainly hasn't taken on board what has happened, or intends to change as a result. This kind of sorrow is self-destructive: there is no growth, no repentance, no opportunity for God to bring healing and transformation.

Thankfully, there is another option: what Paul calls 'godly sorrow' (v9a). The key difference here is that it *leads to change*. The word 'repent' literally means 'turn around' – a helpful modern translation would mean 'change your life'. The sorrow that most of the church in Corinth felt was of this kind: genuine self-reflection, which produced a change in attitudes and behaviours.

The great thing about this kind of sorrow is that it 'leads to salvation' and – amazingly – 'leaves no regret'. God is able to transform the situation so miraculously that, however bad it seemed at the time, in future years even the regret we might have felt has been washed away.

I love the promises contained in this passage. How liberating to know that our mess-ups are not the end! Not even the beginning of the end – instead, with the right attitude, God can use them for healing and transformation. So if you carry regret for some past misdemeanour, take it to God. Let your 'godly sorrow' bring positive change. And may God deliver you to such a sense of restoration that even regret fades, too.

Day 27 – 2 Corinthians 7:13-16 'Refreshed in spirit'

I wonder what refreshes your spirit? Perhaps it's time away, or the beauty of nature. Perhaps it's curling up with a good book, or letting off steam in the gym. Perhaps it's time with people – especially particular people.

We are relational beings. It's how we're wired. We bear the image of the God who is relationship – a perfect trinity of love (something we'll be celebrating in the church's year tomorrow). And so it's no surprise that healthy relationships are good for us. The opposite is true, of course – and sadly most of us know what that means, at least at some level.

As we continue our reflections in this lovely letter, what struck me about this passage, which might otherwise feel like a bit of 'filler', is that simple observation which Paul makes that his friend Titus' spirit was 'refreshed by all of you' (v13). Titus had gone to Corinth with some difficult pastoral issues to navigate – and yet, despite that, he had found his spirit refreshed.

Church communities can be many kinds of things, not all of them positive – but at its heart, what holds churches together is the capacity for people to find their spirits refreshed. We may not get on with everyone, but there will be some people that we find inspiring, or encouraging (to use another key word from today's passage): people who refresh our spirits.

Who might those people be for you? Perhaps they are not in your immediate church family... yet. Perhaps they are further away. Why not take a moment this week to make contact with someone you know who refreshes your spirit? You may not meet them this week, or even for a while – but it's good to connect.

God longs for each of us to find the encouragement to keep going: let's all resolve to be encouragers for each other. And may our great God grant us grace to become, ever more completely, communities where people can find their spirits refreshed.

Day 28 – 2 Corinthians 8:1-4 ‘The source of generosity’

What causes us to be generous? In an age of declining revenues for charities and increasing pressure on wallets, it's a good question to ask. I imagine that, if you were to ask it to 'the person in the street', the most popular answer would be 'wealth'. It's easy to be generous if you have plenty to be generous with.

On the other hand, if you were to ask the average charity recruitment agent on the same street – they would likely tell you that the best motivator is guilt. If people are made to be aware of their sense of privilege, that often makes them commit money, even if for somewhat negative reasons.

Today we begin a key section of this amazing letter: two chapters devoted entirely to the theme of generosity. It's the most detailed and extensive teaching on this subject anywhere in the bible, and, as always in the New Testament letters, the content is inspired by a very real situation. Many churches (and individual Christians) were suffering severe persecution and discrimination, and as a result were desperately poor. Jobs were denied them; and relief which would usually be provided by other bodies was likewise in short supply, owing to opposition towards their beliefs.

So, from very early on, churches organised collections for distribution to other Christians in need. St Paul often co-ordinated these himself, as someone who knew all the churches and travelled extensively (when he wasn't in prison for his faith). There had been a recent such collection, where the Macedonian church had been particularly generous. What are extraordinary, though, are the reasons Paul gives for their generosity: 'overflowing joy and extreme poverty' (v2).

Both are strikingly different – almost polar opposites – to the answers we considered earlier. In contrast to many charity marketing agencies, what we find is that the source of generosity – and the best motivator – is not guilt, but *joy*. This joy was based on their faith, and allowed them to see what they were offering as a privilege (v4), despite the persecution they themselves were experiencing.

Even more remarkable is the second motivator. It turns out that, for the Macedonian church at least, it was not their wealth but their *poverty* that 'welled up in rich generosity.' Perhaps Paul is being deliberately provocative here; but, on the other hand, it accords closely with Jesus' own teaching, and indeed with many recent studies of giving behaviour. Time and again, such studies show that the poor give proportionately more than the rich. Wealth, it turns out, rarely makes people generous – rather the opposite. Something Paul (and Jesus) knew 2,000 years ago!

As we start this week, spend a few moments reflecting on your generosity. Most of us probably feel we could be more generous: pray for God to fill your heart with overflowing joy, that you too would have grace (v1) to live a generous life (in every dimension) this week.

Day 29 – 2 Corinthians 8:5-7 'First to the Lord'

I must confess, the day I am writing this has been a day of mixed priorities – I've always loved my cricket, and with the Test match between England and New Zealand in the balance, and access to Test Match Special online through my computer, I've had to work hard to focus fully on my work! I *may* have listened to the commentary while sorting out some of my less demanding tasks today...

Joking apart, we all know that priorities matter in life. As we continue to reflect today on St Paul's profound teaching on living generously, what we learn is that much of the key to being generous lies in our priorities, too. The Macedonian church – here held up as an example of radical generosity – 'gave themselves first to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us' (v5). To be generous starts with what (or Who) gets top priority in our lives.

When we give God top priority, then everything else falls into place. We see life through God's lenses, we gain his priorities. And, since God is radically self-giving, then (for a life devoted first to the Lord) generosity flows naturally: how could it be otherwise?

It's helpful to observe that the Corinthian church had many other strengths and qualities – Paul names them in v7: 'faith, speech, knowledge... earnestness and... love.' This is both a challenge and an encouragement: a challenge because they could have all these qualities, and somehow not yet be known for being generous; encouragement because it reminds us that there are lots of ways we can grow, and God is gently at work, helping us to address the right things at the right times.

Paul concludes this powerful introduction to the topic of giving with this famous instruction: 'see that you also excel in this grace of giving' (v7). Since 'grace' could also be translated 'gift', I picture Paul writing this with a smile on his face – the gift of giving! And, whilst giving is mentioned as a specific spiritual gift in the New Testament (Romans 12:8), it reminds us that, in Christ, our whole life is gift. We are saved by grace (gift): we also live by grace (gift). For those in Christ, generosity is a natural outworking of all that God has freely and graciously given us.

So today, let's be people whose lives are 'first for the Lord'; and may the Lord fill us with all grace to excel in giving of ourselves to others. It's all gift!

Day 30 – 2 Corinthians 8:7-9 ‘The divine example’

On Monday I took a wedding couple through a rehearsal for their big day. This is not just a question of choreography: I’ve found over the years that it’s always a good idea to give them a taste of what the vows will feel like on the day. Even now, no matter how many times I hear the words of the vow, it still makes the hairs on my neck stand on end: ‘to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part...’

The sense of unconditional love is spine-tingling; but it’s also the sets of contrasts – sickness and health, better and worse, and also richer and poorer. Many of us will know what that feels like: there will have been seasons in our lives when money is comfortable, and others when it’s tight. Some of us may feel that we have only experienced one of those – which might put you at a disadvantage when it comes to today’s reading... but read on, anyway!

After the powerful opening paragraphs of his teaching on generosity, St Paul turns to a divine example. We often think of what Jesus gave up for us: first heaven (temporarily), then popularity, freedom and ultimately his life. But Paul goes further: ‘though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor.’ (v9) I don’t think Paul is referring just to cash here – rather, as Lord of heaven and earth, *all* of the world’s resources are at his disposal. It goes way beyond just money! Jesus has *everything*. And yet... he chose to give it up, for our benefit: ‘....that you through his poverty might become rich.’

It is the great divine transaction. Christ surrenders his limitless wealth that we might receive his riches. Without saying it explicitly, Paul is giving us another motivation for generosity. It’s not just that we follow Christ’s example, though of course it is that; it is also that Jesus is ultimately the owner of everything, and as his beneficiaries, we are stewards of *his* resources. We might like to think that our money is ours – but, in the divine economy, it’s only on loan to us.

Paul returns to this idea later, so we’ll explore it in more detail in a few days’ time. But today, give thanks that Jesus gave everything for you. Rejoice in all that you have received a result. And may that inspire you to live by grace – i.e. graciously! – today.

Day 31 – 2 Corinthians 8:10-12 ‘Three golden rules’

Faith is a practical thing. Important as it is to know what we believe, ultimately this has to become lived experience. It's no use owning a cookbook if you never turn on the oven! Over the last three days we've examined our motives for giving, from various perspectives. We've looked at the importance of joy, of putting God first and of being inspired by Jesus' example. Above all, we've seen how a life of grace underpins generosity in all its forms.

However, we still have to address the question: how (and how much) do we give? What does this motivation mean in action? Paul now turns his attention to this. There's so much gold to mine in the next chapter or so, so what we'll reflect on today is just the start – but it's a very good start, and in one short paragraph (verses 10-12) we get three very useful guidelines: our 'golden rules'.

The first is being *willing to give*. This might sound obvious, but the consistent teaching of the bible is that doing the right thing under compulsion is no real basis for living. (Think about the contrast between guilt and joy which we looked at on Monday.) Enthusiasm and positive intent is far better! We'll look at this in more detail in chapter 9, but let's not miss the value of this now. If we find generosity hard, the best place to start is simply to pray: 'Lord, make me willing.' Or even, 'Lord make me willing to be willing!'

Second, turning *intention to action*. Even if we want to give, quite often we put off actually doing it for a while. The Corinthian church had, it seems, been notable for being among the first to give in a previous fundraising mission. St Paul reminds them not to get 'generosity fatigue' this time around. If the desire is still there, his advice is refreshingly candid: 'Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it.' (v11)

There is, though, one further immensely important practical guideline. Verse 11 does not finish where we left it in the above paragraph, there is an extra phrase: '*...according to your means*'. Generosity is a universal command – but it is (nearly) always according to our ability. Those with greater financial resources are expected to shoulder a greater responsibility. The Corinthian church was relatively better off than some churches, but the basic principle applies: give what you *can*, not what you can't.

In many ways, all of these simple principles are practical outworkings of Jesus' famous Parable of the Talents. They are just as useful now as they were 2,000 years ago. May God continue to grant us grace to give willingly, decisively and as we can – and may he graciously multiply the fruitfulness of this, in us and in others. Amen!

Day 32 – 2 Corinthians 8:13-15 ‘Levelling up?’

One of the hardest things to do in the Christian faith is to try and listen to what God’s word actually says, rather than what we’d *like* it to say. Whilst we will always bring some biases of our own, as far as possible, we need to let God’s word speak for itself, and only then form our other convictions (like politics or church affiliation etc) around it. But this is easier said than done!

I’ve deliberately used a provocative title today because this passage is a classic example of one which presses all kinds of buttons. What did you think when you read it... is Paul a socialist? Is the UK government’s current policy a return to biblical ethics, or a well-meaning soundbite? Does everybody agree with this idea in theory but ignore it in practice? Do we like Paul more now, or less?!

For many years in the West we have broadly signed up to a way of thinking which supposes that self-interest (especially financial self-interest) is the most efficient way to govern a society. It has undoubtedly created lots of winners, who will inevitably say that this way of organising a society is absolutely the best! Unfortunately, there are also many who’ve lost out. In the UK we currently have more millionaires than ever... and 1 in 5 children living in poverty. Or, to put it another way, we have plenty with either too much or too little.

God’s thinking, however, is different – to say that is not a party political statement (not least because none of the main parties fundamentally object to the dominant political philosophy); but it is a political one, because God cares deeply about the ‘polis’ – the settlements of people who make up society. And one of the foundational governing principles of a healthy human society is that no-one has too little and no-one has too much. Extreme poverty and extreme wealth are *both* toxic to our capacity to live well, and to our spiritual flourishing.

We know this is a fundamental principle because the quote Paul uses here (v15) goes back to Israel’s time in the desert after fleeing Egypt. This is the first human society under the direct rule of God, and this quote comes just after God miraculously provides food for them. What that iconic story tells us is that God gives everyone enough; he simply doesn’t allow people to hoard or to starve.

This principle was reinforced in many ways during the Old Testament – through Sabbath and Jubilee, gleaning and tithing. It did not mean that everyone had the same: some still had ‘much’ or ‘little’. But nobody was meant to have *too* little or *too* much.

So ‘equality’ (v13) in today’s passage means both sufficiency and mutuality. Everyone has enough (v15). And also, in time, everyone is able to give to support others (v14). Fortunes fluctuate – but generous redistribution allows everyone not just to survive but to thrive. The effect of such a radical approach to living was profound: for one, it enabled tiny, fledgling churches under immense pressure to keep going, and so birth a movement which would spread across the globe.

Could we ever see the like again today? Perhaps not in secular society – but may it continue to inspire and shape our vision as a church. And may our generous God give us grace to hear it afresh today.

Day 33 – 2 Corinthians 8:16-24 'For whose eyes only?'

Today's passage fills in the human picture of the collection which Paul is organising. It's a helpful reminder that this deep teaching on generosity, which we have feasted in this week, was not created as a set of abstract principles but in response to real needs. This was theology lived in the crucible of real life. In this case, the collection needed reliable organisers – especially those entrusted with the money!

But as I read it, I did find it begging an important question: given that Jesus emphasised how important it was not to do things to be seen by other people, what do we make of Paul's insistence here in v21: 'For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man?' Is that a contradiction?

Thankfully, no! What Jesus criticises the Pharisees for is seeking praise from people rather than God. They were puffing up their ego, not humbly serving their Lord. The motive here is different: when Paul is stressing how important it is to be seen to be doing right, this is about *the reputation of the church and the gospel*, not of individuals. Titus and Paul don't care if they're popular or not: what they do care about is that no-one criticises the integrity of process, and thereby makes negative conclusions about the God they love and worship.

This remains a useful principle in church life now. Sadly, we all know the damage that a lack of integrity does to the reputation of any organisation – especially the church. So we continue to do certain things quite visibly: not for our egos, but for the Lord's reputation. That might include a visible commitment to safeguarding, or dual signatory bank accounts, or humane and generous policies about sick pay or support of volunteers, as well as the publication of annual reports about our life and practices which anyone can read. The list goes on – but the point about all of this is that it underpins the integrity and witness of the church, and therefore brings honour to Christ (v19,v23).

Many of these things are very unglamorous, and often under-appreciated. To those of you reading today who do a lot of this stuff – thank you! You are more valued than you may ever know. And to the rest of us: take a few moments to pray that we continue to do these things well (and for the people who do them), that it all might bring glory to God.

Day 34 – 2 Corinthians 9:1-7 ‘Infectious enthusiasm’

Enthusiasm is infectious. Just think of Mr Motivator – well, perhaps you’d prefer not to remember the various Lycra all-in-ones, but you get my drift. The hundreds of thousands who joined in Joe Wicks’ daily lockdown workouts were mostly those who hadn’t expected to find themselves stretching and whatnot in front of their screen. But Joe’s enthusiasm was relentless, and hugely effective.

We Brits have an uneasy relationship with enthusiasm. ‘The Englishman’s way of expressing deep emotion is to stare silently into the fire,’ is a quote whose author escapes me, but perfectly characterises the kind of stiff upper lip and stoic impassiveness we used to think of as quintessential to our national culture.

However, what everyone who works in marketing knows is that there’s nothing like a personal recommendation or invitation to generate change. Adverts, PR, re-branding: they have their place – but if someone you like does something and recommends it, that is about ten times more effective.

Today’s passage showcases the power of enthusiasm in two ways. First, we learn that enthusiasm has a direct spiritual benefit: indeed, it is the *only* healthy way to give. Forced generosity is not really generosity at all, Paul says – rather, ‘God loves a cheerful giver’ (v7). There’s nothing wrong with enthusiastic giving, because it is the overflow of a heart that is itself grateful for all its blessings.

Second, enthusiastic generosity inspires others. Over Paul’s two long letters, the Corinthians have not often been held up as models to other people, but in the area of giving they have been inspirational: ‘your enthusiasm has stirred most of [the Macedonian churches] to action.’ (v2) It’s worth bearing in mind here that the Corinthians did not promote themselves in this, just as Jesus encouraged – rather, Paul and the other leaders had recommended their example.

As long as we avoid the shameless self-promoters, there’s no harm in the Christian life seeking out inspiring examples of giving. If you regularly support a charity why not check out their website, or read their latest newsletter, to see if you can find something to inspire you? Maybe think of people you’ve known along your life journey whose generosity has stirred your soul? And may God grant us all grace to keep giving cheerfully. God loves it!

Day 35 – 2 Corinthians 9:6-11 'Reaping what we sow'

'You reap what you sow.' This is one of those biblical phrases that has found its way into popular culture, and it might come as something of a surprise to find it goes a lot further back than, say, Shakespeare or Chaucer – in fact it goes even further back than the New Testament, all the way to one of the earliest books of Scripture more than 3,000 years ago: the book of Job .

There are several references to the idea in the Old Testament, usually negative i.e. you sow something bad, and reap accordingly. But here, Paul turns this idea on its head to something positive. Indeed, he suggests something really quite radical, which is that our generosity is paid back to us in all kinds of ways, both spiritual – 'harvest of your righteousness' (v10) – and material: 'You will be enriched in every way, so that you can be generous on every occasion' (v11).

Even more amazingly, the promise to those who are generous is that you will have 'all that you need' and there will be fruitful outcomes: 'you will abound in every good work' (v8).

This sets Paul's encouragement to generosity, which we've soaked up over these last few days, in a totally new and unexpected dimension. God always repays! It turns the question 'can we afford to be generous?' on its head – the real question is: 'Can we afford *not* to be generous?'

In these troubled times of rising prices and equally rising anxiety, it is tempting to cut back on what we give. And in human terms that seems the obvious thing to do, and I wouldn't blame any of us for doing so. But there is a divine dimension which is affirmed in today's passage and can only be seized by faith, and that is that those who choose sacrificial generosity will find that they will always have 'all that they need' – God will repay. We don't know how, or when – but he does.

Today, we all need to pray for grace to hear this remarkable – and challenging! – word. I can't advise you what to do in your circumstances; but I can point you to the promises of our great and generous God, the One who repays.

Day 36 – 2 Corinthians 9:12-15 ‘Thanks overflowing’

As we finish this amazing pair of chapters (8-9) on the subject of generosity, you may think that we'd looked at it from every angle. But Paul has one last point to make, and it's a lovely way to draw this teaching to a close: 'This service that you perform,' he says in v12, 'is not only supplying the Lord's people, but is overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.'

In other words: if you want one more reason for why it's a good idea to be generous – look at the gratitude it generates in a human heart. And not just towards you – it's directed to God as well. When people are the recipients of radical generosity, they not only feel thankful towards the donor, they often become aware at a deep level that 'someone is watching over them,' that God has been the unseen hand in this all along.

And this overflowing of thanks to God also leads to one other thing: those who have been blessed by our generosity may well offer the one thing they can back to us: their prayers. This was the case in Paul's fundraising campaign: 'in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you.' (v14) In time, these grateful recipients may be able to offer material generosity of their own: but prayer is a great first way to respond. We give as we can, not as we can't.

What these two chapters have ultimately reminded us of is this: the divine perspective on life is that *all of life is gift*. Most of our human structures and relationships work on forms of contract: you get this, I get that. What we offer comes with strings attached, things to be paid in return. Christ calls us to something different: unconditional giving, and guilt-free receiving. It's not a one-way street: as we've seen over the last couple of weeks, God always repays. Those who give generously will receive generously as well. But these are relationships not of obligation but of gift. There is no guilt or compulsion: it is something organic, something borne out of freedom and bathed in trust.

It is radically different to human systems of obligation: but how much more liberating! It's why Paul can conclude this section with this simple exclamation of joy (v15): 'thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!' What is that gift? In context, I think the gift is this type of giving itself. To be part of this network of mutual, unconditional, Spirit-led and Spirit-infused love is something beyond words. It is rooted in Christ, but transforms the whole way we see the world.

So as we take a moment to turn this back to God in prayer: let God fill your heart with 'overflowing thanks'. And may God grant us grace to grow in living all of life as gift.

Day 37 – 2 Corinthians 10:1-5 ‘Spiritual weapons’

The early church was almost exclusively a pacifist movement. Even in the early third century we know from Christian writings of that time that Roman soldiers who converted to Christ would not be allowed to be baptised unless they left the army. Subsequent generations of Christians have come to a greater variety of views on this subject – although Christian pacifism remains a powerful influence on many strands of church thinking – nevertheless, what we see in today’s passage are weapons that even the early church was happy to use!

It is clear, however, that these are not physical weapons: ‘We do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.’ (vv3-4) Elsewhere in scripture we see specific references to the bible, to prayer and to prophecy as being the sort of ‘weapons’ Paul has in mind. But here, what we see is the more general sense of what these weapons are designed to do.

The “enemy” is ‘every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God’ (v5) – in other words, it is misguided or ungodly thinking in all its various forms. These might be ‘arguments’, lies, or self-promoting ideas (‘pretensions’) which get in the way of our growing in obedience to Christ. And Paul gives us a powerful image of what we are to do with such thoughts: ‘we take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ’ (v5). In other words, we take our destructive thought patterns and make them prisoners of war!

Each of us has particular thoughts which damage our spiritual well-being – they might attack our joy, our peace, our hope, our purpose, our sense of being loved by God. You’ll probably know straight away what yours are! If not, take a few moments to reflect what they might be....

The wonderful news is that we don’t have to accept these thoughts as unbeatable. We have a weapon which is more powerful: the word of God, aided and abetted by prayer. Every lie has a powerful truth to destroy it – a truth which brings us life, and draws us to Jesus.

Thankfully, many modern bibles do the hard work for us and contain lists of scriptures to address all the most common ‘strongholds’. Why not use some of those references today? Or go back to a favourite passage and let the word of God soak deep. You are loved. You are saved through Christ. You are one in whom Christ dwells, and you live in the strong and unshakable kingdom of God. And let no-one tell you otherwise!

Day 38 – reprise of yesterday! (make sure you read Day 37 first)

Yesterday's teaching on demolishing the strongholds in our lives is such a profound part of our spiritual journey that it's worth another day just to pick up where we left off yesterday. If you've got one of those bible 'lists of helpful scriptures', why not look up a few more?

If your bible doesn't have such a list, why not sit with one of these today: Ephesians 1:3-14, Ephesians 3:14-21, Colossians 3:1-17. Give thanks for who you are in Christ – whatever we tell ourselves, whatever others may tell us, *this* is who you are.

Our Lord Jesus said: 'You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.' May the Spirit of God pour more of that glorious truth into our lives, that we would know greater freedom from all those 'strongholds' that drag us down. Amen.

Day 39 – 2 Corinthians 10:1-18 ‘Appropriate boasting?’

The last few chapters of Paul’s letter make for slightly harder reading – let’s admit that! – but there’s still gold to mine here, too. After the amazing reflections on generosity, Paul returns to a root problem which has been an undercurrent throughout the letter – and indeed has contributed significantly to the challenges this church in Corinth has faced – and that is the nature of leadership and authority in the church. This matters because, unless Paul can reaffirm his leadership, the risk is that all this deep wisdom he has been sharing could be undermined, or even ignored.

As we’ve seen, since Paul left Corinth after founding the church there, the Christian community has been divided by various self-appointed leaders. Influenced by the popular culture in Greece of wandering teachers and the love of academic disputes for their own sake, some of these teachers have openly questioned Paul’s fitness for leadership.

Their criticisms have been twofold: first, they object to Paul asserting that the source of his authority is rooted in the Lord (v8) – when (in their view, and according to prevailing prejudices) it ought to be determined by his public speaking ability. But Paul is having none of it: ‘You are judging by appearances.’ (v7) His ‘qualification’ is that he has been commissioned by Jesus Christ; and, further, that his role is to ‘build you up rather than tear you down’ (v8). The implication here is that it is not Paul who is the destructive influence in their church!

Second, Paul’s self-appointed rivals point to a perceived difference between Paul’s capacity to write and his skills as a speaker (v10) – even suggesting a moral weakness in this, that he can only be ‘bold’ when he’s not in the room, but is ‘timid’ when meeting people face-to-face (v1). Anyone who has looked at the life of Paul would find it hard to imagine that Paul was timid! But Paul doesn’t say that: rather he points to the fact that he is not interested in self-promotion, only in their wellbeing.

If he’s going to boast, he says, he’ll only boast about what God has done among them (vv13-14). In fact, all he’s really interested in is in giving the glory to God: ‘Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord’ (quoting Jeremiah v17).

He finishes today’s passage with a very simple yardstick, which is pretty good advice for all of us: ‘It is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.’ (v18) We do things for The Audience of One –what *God* thinks of us is what really matters.

So this week, whatever else we need to be and to do, let’s resolve to be faithful to the only One whose opinion really matters – in hope and trust that he will bless our work and make our lives fruitful. May the opening words of Psalm 115 be our guide: ‘Not to us, Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.’ Amen.

Day 40 – 2 Corinthians 11:1-15 'Spiritual counterfeiting'

During one of the school assemblies I do for Easter, at a certain point I show them a one billion dollar bank note – genuine, of course! And, for the record, given to me as a present by my Aunt Edna to clear a historic family tax debt of several hundred million pounds. It's a lot of fun, the kids usually get very excited about the idea of a slip of paper being worth a billion dollars, and I can talk about how God clears our 'debts' through the story of Easter.

The dollar bill is obviously a fake – but in other areas of life, sometimes it's not so easy to spot a counterfeit. Sadly, fraud is the big growth crime of our age – today, as I write, there are newspaper headlines about this very subject, and even wise and experienced people have been caught out by false claims.

In today's passage, Paul gets to the heart of the issue with those who have consistently undermined his leadership. We've already seen how these self-appointed 'teachers' are divisive, arrogant and shallow, more interested in the big show than humble faith. Paul even refers in today's passage to the fact that he has been criticised for *not* demanding to be paid (v7) – suggesting that these teachers have been saying something along the lines of: 'well, if he was really any good, his flock would pay his upkeep, like people do ours.' It's remarkable to think that this was treated as a weakness, not a blessing!

But, important though all these observations are, they are not the heart of the problem with these 'super-apostles' (we don't know if this is a term made up by Paul, or one they themselves used to describe their ministry, but it's quite a poignant nickname) – the biggest issue of all is that they are distorting the faith itself: a different Jesus, a different Spirit, a different gospel (v4).

As a Christian leader, Paul has faced criticism and opposition for most of his life. And he can live with rivals and boasters and freeloaders – what he can't tolerate is the beautiful message itself being distorted. We don't know exactly what is being taught by these 'super-apostles', though we get glimpses in other letters: a heavy emphasis on hidden knowledge; and degrading the value of the physical world, leading many to abuse their bodies either through promiscuity or harsh practices. Jesus was also probably being taught as a 'start point' but not enough, and the Spirit was not taught specifically as being the Spirit of Jesus.

Paul warns his readers that these distortions are not just matters of debate – they are part of the spiritual battle. Our spiritual adversary is using this teaching to undermine the church and discredit the faith (vv13-15). It's easy to picture the devil as a transparently evil figure; but Paul warns that his greatest weapon is far more subtle – faking goodness ('masquerading as an angel of light', to use Paul's powerful image). The most destructive evil is that which is dressed up as something good.

It remains valuable teaching for us today. We live in a 'spiritual' age – but far too little attention is paid to where the 'spirit' comes from. The spiritual world, as Paul makes clear, has both good and evil sources – God and the devil. Since God is Christlike, and the only Spirit we long for more of is the Spirit of Christ: if something 'spiritual' is not obviously pointing to Jesus, then it can only come from somewhere else, somewhere that is not of God.

Today, let's pray for wisdom to discern anything that is offering fake spiritual promises; let's pray for grace to walk free from anything unhealthy; and let's welcome the true and life-giving Spirit of Christ into our lives, confident that God is well able to bless us and protect us.

Day 41 – 2 Corinthians 11:16-33 'The cost of ministry'

'Wise as snakes and innocent as doves.' This cryptic observation of Jesus about life as a disciple reminds us that, though innocence should be our default position, there are times when a bit of 'street-smart' thinking or behaviour is appropriate. Paul faces such a situation here: faced with opponents openly questioning his qualifications or fitness to lead a church – bizarre as that is, given that he has planted dozens of churches, including the very church where his authority is being questioned – Paul finally fights fire with fire.

At first sight this passage makes for odd reading, but the theologian R.V.G. Tasker comments helpfully as to why Paul starts 'boasting': 'It goes entirely against the grain with him to have to defend himself against his detractors with words which sound the jarring note of self-praise. Not all the Corinthians, however, are so appreciative of their apostle... and it is to this wavering minority that he now appeals.'

Indeed, Paul makes it clear at the start that this is a distasteful exercise for him, reminding them that this is not how Jesus would behave (v17, and therefore not how he wants to either – hence the fact that he has hardly paraded his credentials with them before). But, needs must: 'Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast.' (v18)

So Paul goes on to share what his life of leadership has looked like. It starts normally enough: he talks about his lineage, as an orthodox Jew of solidly respectable heritage. What we read next, however, is not only an astonishing litany of the sufferings he has endured to be faithful to Christ – it totally subverts the 'boasting' genre his opponents were expecting. There is nothing about his education, his rhetorical skills, his five-star reviews by adoring audiences or his preaching successes; it is about the cost of servant leadership, of pain and punishment and danger, all given freely for the glory of God.

He finishes with this devastating critique: 'if I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.' (v30) This was just how he had first appeared to the people who became his friends and fellow-believers in Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 2:3, noting the fruit of his ministry in 1 Corinthians 1:26-27) – and he isn't changing now. His 'qualification' ultimately is that he is following closely the path of humble suffering that Christ trod – and there is no better qualification than that.

These are sobering words for all of us who dare to be in Christian leadership. They are also soberingly true for many Christians around the world. Let us pray for them today, that Christ would be their, and our, refuge and strength, 'a very present help in time of trouble' (Psalm 46:1).

Day 42 – 2 Corinthians 12:1-6 ‘Spiritual realities’

The last book of the bible – the Revelation of St John – is a vision of heaven. It is quite a remarkable text, and a source of fascination to our culture well beyond the church. But St John is not the only early apostle to have received a vision of heaven: today we learn that St Paul had a similar vision too. ‘I know a man in Christ,’ he says (v2) – but it’s clear that this man is him!

What do we learn from this vision? Very little – Paul is at pains to stress that he saw and heard ‘inexpressible things, things that no-one is permitted to tell’ (v4). In our current culture, when visions of heaven are often publicised in the media, even to the extent of major films made about the recipients of such dreams, it is a healthy reminder that the bible is deliberately discreet about exactly what heaven is like. We are told enough to whet our appetites, but the very fact that it is *heaven* means that the full reality is beyond our human comprehension.

(As an aside, Paul says ‘third heaven’ to reflect the traditional Jewish understanding of ‘the heavens’: the first heaven is the air around and above us, the second heaven is the sky, including the sun, moon and stars – they had no idea these bodies were so far away; and the third heaven is actual heaven, where God lives. So he is stressing that this was genuinely a vision of heaven, although it was so overwhelming that he can’t say if it was ‘in the body or out of the body’ (vv2-3).)

Why does Paul talk about this vision? He is still confronting his opponents with the vanity of their claims. It is likely that, alongside their pride in their rhetorical expertise, they also claimed to have special spiritual experiences, and are questioning if Paul can match them for their understanding of ‘the spiritual world’. As Paul admitted last time, and continues to emphasise, ‘there is nothing to be gained’ (v1) from this kind of leadership arrogance: but he feels he has to demonstrate that he can more than match anything they’ve experienced, to underline his credibility with those who’ve been taken in by these charlatans.

But what is most important is where he lands in verse 6; the key thing for today is that there are two spiritual realities which Paul is talking about. There is the reality of heaven – and it’s good to give thanks that heaven is for real! But there’s a second spiritual reality: how do we judge anyone’s spiritual maturity or authority? In the end there is only one yardstick: what ‘is warranted by what I do or say’ (v6). Does his life match up to what he proclaims?

In the end, Paul gets back to basics: look at what I’ve said and done among you, he says. I’ve led you to Christ, shown you how to live by word and example, I’ve supported and loved and nurtured you. That is the basis of my authority, and that is also why you know I’ve got your back.

Today, let’s renew our resolve to walk the talk – and let’s pray for God to fill us again with all that we need to keep journeying with him, from this earth towards the ultimate spiritual reality of eternity.

Day 43 – 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 'All-sufficient grace'

In the story of God's people through the centuries, there have been many examples of people with significant health conditions or disabilities being greatly used by God. A famous recent example would be Joni Eareckson Tada, paralysed from the shoulders down after a swimming accident aged just 17, who has had a remarkable ministry around the world since that dreadful moment.

A personal hero of mine, William Wilberforce, also suffered with poor health throughout his life, frequently needing days or weeks in bed, even as he led the campaign to abolish the slave trade. And in today's passage we learn that St Paul himself had some sort of chronic health condition. He calls it his 'thorn in the flesh' (v7), and to this day we've no idea exactly what it was.

But we do know it was long-term, and had a noticeable impact on his life. If someone with as high a tolerance for pain and suffering as Paul can call it 'tormenting', it must have been significant. (As an aside, it has been speculated that Dr Luke – writer of the Gospel and Acts – initially got involved with Paul's team to assist him medically with whatever this 'thorn' was.)

It is also striking that this condition was not healed, especially when we consider that Paul frequently exercised the spiritual gift of healing, and was privileged to see many miracles. And yet, despite seeking supernatural healing three times for himself, the 'thorn' remained. Why?

Paul eventually arrives at a profound answer in verse 9 – an answer which came direct from the Lord himself: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' God did not remove Paul's 'thorn' so that Paul could know and experience that *God's grace was always enough*. This 'thorn' helps to explain why Paul is so keen to subvert the arrogant boasting of his opponents, and instead talk about his weaknesses. It's not just to keep Paul from arrogance himself (though he admits that this might have been the initial reason in v7), there is a deeper spiritual lesson here: God's power is made perfect in weakness.

Today you may feel weak, or indeed be struggling with a health condition or other 'thorn'. And we can never underplay the challenge of these things – they hurt, they debilitate us, they might even torment us. But take heart: God's grace is sufficient for you. God's power shows itself most fully in our weakness. Pray for that all-sufficient grace to surround you, to fill you, to lift you up today.

Day 44 – 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (ii) ‘Strength through weakness’

Today, I want add a postscript to Paul’s profound teaching of yesterday. Nobody ever seeks to be weak or in pain – at least not willingly. Generally these things happen to us, and we find a way to live with them.

However, Paul finishes this remarkably honest insight into his own private world with one last observation: ‘I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.... for when I am weak, then I am strong.’ (vv9-10)

No doubt Paul never wanted his ‘thorn in the flesh’ – we know as much from the repeated times he asked to be healed of it (v8). But over the years, armed with this understanding that God is most powerfully at work in our weakness, he has come not just to accept it, but to actively embrace it. He longs to experience the full depths of relationship with Christ, and has learned that he experiences this most deeply in such times.

Few of us will probably ever come to love our suffering – but there is something powerful in this mindset that we can learn from. It is so easy to employ strategies to succeed in life which are all about us: our gifts, our hard work, our privileges of birth or wealth, or knowing the right people.

But there is another way – God’s way, the kingdom way, the way of divine blessing. A way which trusts God to bless our work and our relationships, a way which refuses worldly ambition and lets God open the right doors at the right time. A way which believes what Jesus says, that ‘the last will be first,’ that ‘whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant’ – in other words, that God subverts the human order through humility, service and ‘weakness’.

I’m still working through the idea that I might be able to rejoice in my weaknesses, my ‘thorns’ – perhaps you are, too. But may we all have grace to believe – indeed live by, set our hope on – this truth: that, by God’s glorious, all-sufficient grace, when we are weak, then we are strong. May Christ be our strength today, and forever more.

Day 45 – 2 Corinthians 12:11-13 'A true apostle'

Everyone has a problem with miracles – until they see one! (And when they see one, they don't have a problem with miracles anymore...) This is my rather simplistic answer to the sceptics who question if miracles can ever happen; or, if they did once, they don't anymore.

Although many cultures around the world are much more open to the reality of the spiritual world, the issue of miracles remains a hotly debated one in the Western Church. When I was younger I would have shared many of these doubts, too. For me it was less question of scientific 'rationalism' – rather, I wondered whether God so much preferred people to believe without them, that he would never cause one to happen now.

However, I saw my first bona fide, no-doubt-about-it, medically verifiable miracle just before my 23rd birthday: a broken foot spontaneously healed. I also saw the marvellous outcome of the miracle: many teenagers responding to the message of Christ, since they now had undeniable proof of the reality of God, and his love and good intentions towards them. From that point on, I didn't have a problem with miracles anymore!

Today, Paul reminds his readers that the marks of 'a true apostle [include] signs, wonders and miracles.' (v12) The word apostle means 'sent one', and it refers to the people specifically tasked to initiate works of God. The apostles of Christ – as called – were the original twelve disciples, plus Paul. These possessed a unique authority, not just to found the church, but to write most of what is now the New Testament. Thereafter, Paul elsewhere refers to 'the apostles of the church': these are the people who came after the first generation, with the same gift to pioneer significant works of God.

Although some disagree that we have such 'apostles' today, I take the view that the gift remains part of the ongoing kingdom of God, not least because scripture distinguishes between the unique first generation ('apostles of Christ') and those who followed after them ('apostles of the church') – if the latter group existed for a second generation, why not a third, a thirtieth and indeed a three-hundredth? We still need people with that gift as much as ever – especially in a new city like Milton Keynes.

What I have experienced is that miracles tend to happen much more often when God's kingdom needs to break new ground. We saw regular miracles when ministering in the prison, for example. That might also help to explain why they tend to be less common in established Christian communities. It's not that God has less authority: rather that his authority is less contested!

In the end, if we still need those with the apostolic gifting (which we do), and 'signs, wonders and miracles' are a mark of that gifting, then it follows that miracles remain a real part of God's kingdom today. Perhaps you have seen, or experienced one yourself; perhaps you have not, but have read or heard of others. Either way, take a moment to give thanks that God can still do marvellous things today; and let's also pray for God to continue to raise up true apostles – those called to break new ground in this world, for his glory.

Day 46 – 2 Corinthians 12:14-19 ‘Everything I do...’

As you read the title for today, no doubt some of you were completing the song! ‘Everything I do, I do it for you.’ Bryan Adams’ million-selling single of 30 years ago finds it echoes in our passage for today. As we’ve seen over the last few days, Paul has been defending his ministry among the church in Corinth, and he draws the strands together with this fitting summary: ‘Everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening.’ (v19)

It’s important for him to say this, since he at last reveals that the time is ready for him to make another visit. Early in the letter, he made it clear that he didn’t want to come if his only role was to be ‘bad cop’, involving more pain for all concerned (2:1). And tomorrow, we’ll see that he is still worried that this may be the case. However, wants them to know that, whatever happens, his ultimate desire is to see them grow as believers. He wants to bless and to strengthen them.

In the end, his priority is what is going on in their hearts: ‘what I want is not your possessions, but you.’ (v14) This is another reference to the fact that he was not paid by the church when he led them, since he earned his own living by making tents. This was in stark contrast to their current leaders (who have criticised him for it), and he has addressed this at length before now; but Paul this time makes light of it, joking that parents usually have to pay for their children, not the other way around! (v14) He continues the banter in v17: ‘Crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery!’

Paul has tackled some challenging stuff in this letter; so it comes as something of a relief to sense that he is still writing with a smile on his face. We can only hope it was received as such by his readers in Corinth – though what must have given them great reassurance was to know that his concern was ultimately for their wellbeing. He is only interested in his reputation in so far as it allows him to continue to pastor them with love, comfort and encouragement.

Those who are called to lead have a high calling, and a weighty responsibility. We ‘walk in the same footsteps, by the same Spirit.’ (v18) The Anglican Ordination Service quite rightly insists to new ministers that: ‘You cannot do this in your strength.’ Today, take a moment to pray for all those called into Christian leadership, that our motivation would be like Paul’s: that everything we do would be to strengthen, encourage and bless those we serve.

Day 47 – 2 Corinthians 12:20-13:4 ‘By God’s power’

‘Life is like a box of chocolates – you never know what you’re gonna get.’ If Forrest Gump’s famous words strike a chord with most of us, they equally apply to some visits we have to make, too. Many of us have a particular friend or family member where every visit has that frisson of unpredictability. Like the proverbial box of chocolates, you never know what you’re gonna get!

Paul faced a similar dilemma as he prepared for his next – third – visit to Corinth. ‘I am afraid,’ he says quite candidly, ‘that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be.’ The reason lies at the heart of both of his long letters to this church (this one included): they have a chaotic community life, riven with factions, rivalries, and immorality.

Paul has been trying to address these issues for months now, and, whilst he hopes that these are finally being resolved (see 2:6-8), he is aware that things might not be right yet. The church is still plagued with arrogant, insecure leaders, who are determined to keep stoking the divisions, and are quite happy to let the licentious behaviour continue. It is with these adversaries in mind that Paul has written the last few chapters, and he now gets to the crux of the matter: in the end, when all is said and done, who has the authority to lead this church in Corinth, and to declare the will of God?

It appears that the church, egged on by these leaders, was demanding that Paul produce proof that he is speaking the will of Christ (v3). This, the same Paul, who led most of them to faith! Who saw signs, wonders and miracles as he worked among them, and has planted many other churches elsewhere too...

It’s hard to imagine what further proof he could offer, but he reminds them that spiritual authority is not ultimately a matter of human accolades – it comes directly from Christ. Christ himself came in weakness, but exercised tremendous spiritual authority. So, too, does Paul. It’s a development of what he said a few verses ago about power being ‘made perfect in weakness.’ Then the focus was on affirming Christ’s sufficient grace in our weakness: now, Paul turns it around, to remind them of the spiritual power that accompanies this weakness.

It’s a healthy reminder that ultimately, spiritual authority is conferred by Christ. It’s good to have human ways to discern appropriate leaders: but what we really need to look for is Christlikeness, and Christ’s authority manifested through a person’s ministry. Let’s pray that God would continue to raise up Christlike, and Christ-anointed leaders for his church – and may we all have grace to find our security, our identity, even our authority, in Christ, our glorious Saviour and Lord.

Day 48 – 2 Corinthians 13:5-10 'Christ in us'

Sometimes the most basic things are the easiest to forget. We get so used to them being there that we don't notice them. Think of the times you've lost something, only to discover that it was where it always was – you just didn't see it. Or maybe that's just me!

As Paul draws the threads of his letter together, he goes 'back to basics' – after a lengthy defence of his ministry as one given by Jesus himself, he finishes with a very simple, but profound observation: 'Don't you realise that Christ Jesus is in you?' (v5) In other words, you know what Christian ministry is, because the author of it rests in your very hearts...

The glorious truth that Christ is in us sits at the very centre of the purpose of the gospel. God's whole plan for humanity is that his image might be restored in us – and this is now possible through Christ. Having reconciled us to God, we have the awesome privilege of the Spirit of Almighty God dwelling in our hearts. Christ is now in us!

This news is what Paul describes in Colossians as 'the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people.' It is this 'mystery' which fuels all of our journeys of faith, transforming us from the inside out. And yet, it is so easy to forget: to try and do things all by ourselves, or (in the case of the church on Corinth) to get led along by others, forgetting the very basics that define our Christian identity.

In Paul's case, he wants to remind the Corinthians that this authority he received from Christ is 'for building you up, not tearing you down.' (v10) In many ways, that is true for us, too. Whilst the Spirit may convict us when we get led astray, ultimately the activity of the Christ's Spirit is always for our benefit.

Today, give thanks for that simple, but life-defining, truth that Christ is in you – yes, *really*. And pray to become ever more aware of his presence – especially in all that you face today.

Day 49 – 2 Corinthians 13:11-13 'Full restoration'

One thing you'll notice about Paul's letters is that they always finish in a burst of quick-fire instructions. This is primarily for practical reasons: vellum (ancient paper) was expensive and rare, and sheets were highly prized. So when you wrote on a sheet of vellum, you used every inch. The length of your letter was also defined by the size of the sheet, or the number of them. So Paul in all probability is having to finish this letter regardless, as he is running out of space on his sheet(s)!

And what he wants, above all, for this church is that their wounds are healed: with him, and with each other. So he urges them: 'Strive for full restoration.' (v11) How? Well, the next three phrases represent a pretty good summary. If you want to be restored, he says, why not try the following:

Encourage one another – not much of that going on in Corinth at present... Encouragement is one of the most valuable, but least appreciated gifts. Just as Paul wants to build them up (see yesterday), so he also wants them to build each other up.

Be of one mind – this was definitely not happening in Corinth, either. They were beset by divisions, and Paul tackled this early in his first letter (see 1 Corinthians ch3). Instead, Paul urges, why not focus on what unites you instead? That's always good advice for a church, even today.

Live in peace – we may not always agree, but we can peacefully disagree. And Paul reminds them that God is not just a God of love, but of peace. This God delights to be with those who seek peace.

One last instruction underpins these concluding remarks: despite their troubles, Paul reminds them to 'rejoice'. Praise unlocks so many of God's other blessings – and makes the capacity to be restored much more likely.

We don't know if the church in Corinth heeded this advice – but it's great advice for us today. If the Lord nudges you to seek restoration with someone, go for it! If not, we can all rejoice in the Lord, giving thanks for the sure knowledge that the God of love and peace is with us.

Day 50 – 2 Corinthians 13:14 ‘An iconic ending’

And so we get to the final verse! Congratulations to all of you who’ve read the past 49 reflections, covering 256 of the 257 verses of this amazing letter. After the highs of chapters 3, 5, 8 and 9, I know the last chapters of the letter are harder going, representing as they do a critical issue for Paul’s ministry – i.e. his Christ-appointed authority – which is rarely disputed now.

Although, saying that, it has been notable in recent years to see a 21st-century version of the Corinthian false teachers trying to persuade us that ‘Paul invented Christianity, not Jesus.’ There isn’t time here to debunk that myth, but I hope these reflections have provided more than enough evidence to refute it. If Paul appears sometimes to have slightly different emphases, we must never forget that his unique (and enormous) task was to make the Jewish underpinning of the faith accessible to the whole world, and also to interpret Christ’s teachings in settled communities.

The troubles of the Corinthian church demonstrate both the complexity and the importance of that calling. How do diverse groups of believers learn to follow Jesus in the same place, with the same people, over years and decades? How do they stay united, retain their integrity, keep serving each other and resist unhealthy influences?

This last verse gives us one last answer. It is ironic that by far the most famous verse of this letter is the very final one. It’s one that, today as much as ever, the church around the world uses to confer a final blessing on its meetings. I myself used it at the end of a church council meeting on Monday evening, with all of us joining in: ‘The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all (or, as we amend slightly at the end: be with us all, evermore. Amen).’

It’s more than just a neat soundbite. In one short sentence we share the foundation of our faith: it starts, of course, with grace. Grace is the beginning and the ending of our good news. God’s undeserved love for us flawed human beings. That in itself reminds us of the selfless love of God – noting that the word for love here – ‘agape’ – is the new one invented by Christians to describe true love as humble service.

And the goal, the outcome, the highest expression in a community of this grace-filled love is ‘oneness’. The word ‘fellowship’ is a bit weak nowadays: we think of bad instant coffee in frosted brown cups; but what ‘koinonia’ really means is a deep unity, a communion of those who are deeply loved by God. This can only be a gift of Christ’s Holy Spirit.

Undeserved mercy, selfless love, deep unity: what a picture of the redeemed life. The Corinthian church certainly fell far short (though we can, bizarrely, be grateful for that, for without it we would not have this letter). No doubt we likewise fall short, too. But it remains our goal and our calling.

And so, I invite us all to pray it today, with renewed enthusiasm. To pray it for ourselves, our churches, and for those we long to see drawn to the love of Christ. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore. Amen!