Identity, Gratitude, Unity
1 Corinthians 1:1-17

We're starting a new series in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. And I know that what you call these letters has got a certain president into trouble, so, just so you know, in England we call it 1 Corinthians, not 1st Corinthians. So if I call it 1 Corinthians and not 1st Corinthians, that's why, it's not because I've never read it. Just so you know.

But let me ask you, are Christians brainwashed? Because that get's bandied around a lot: you only believe what you believe, or do the stuff you do because that's how you've been brought up, because that's what your church tells you. So, are Christians brainwashed?

And the answer, of course, is 'sure!' But that's true of everyone. It's just as true of the non-Christian as of the Christian. The family you grew up in, the culture you live in, the friends you mix with, all form you without you even knowing it. It's not just Christians who are brainwashed, everyone is. It just depends on what your brain is washed in. And the culture you inhabit and the effect it has on you is virtually invisible to you, because it's just the way things are.

And these Corinthian Christians had so absorbed the culture around them, that the way they lived out their Christian faith was far more shaped by that culture than by the gospel. The vision of the good life that they'd just imbibed from growing up in Corinth, without even realising that was what was happening, was having a vastly greater impact on how they thought and lived, than the gospel. And Paul's writing to re-orient them.

But listen, that's not a problem peculiar to Corinth. We're always in danger of being more shaped by the way things *just are*, than by Christ and what he's done for us.

Which is why we need 1 Corinthians, because their culture was scarily like our culture.

You see, original, Greek Corinth was destroyed by the Romans in 146BC and left in ruins. But in 44BC Julius Caesar rebuilt it as a Roman colony. And it's geographical position just about guaranteed its success. Because, with its two ports at each end of the road crossing the isthmus of what's now Greece, it effectively controlled trade between east and west. So it rapidly became this thriving, international, cosmopolitan centre of commerce. But also of sport, because it hosted the Isthmian games, second only to the Olympics, with all the tourists and money the games brought.

And the city was resettled with freed slaves and veterans from the Roman army. So not only did its geography guarantee its success, so did the ambition of its citizens. Here were people determined to make it. And it drew people from around the Roman world determined to make it big. And with its network of patrons, Corinth offered you that chance. Play it right, build your network, use your contacts and you too could climb the ladder of success.

Corinthian culture brimmed with ambition and the pursuit of success and pleasure. Here was a city that offered you the chance to get out of life what you wanted.

The problem is, that surrounding culture was seeping into the church. And in his introduction to this letter, Paul pre-empts some of the issues he's got to address.

An Identity That's Received Not Achieved

Two big issues shaping our societies today are identity and individualism: who I am, and who gets to say who I am. And the cultural air you breath, the cultural water you swim in tells you that you can create your own self, that it's who you say you are that you are. And no-one else can say otherwise. And if people don't support you in your chosen identity, then there's trouble.

And strangely, Corinth wasn't much different. You also got to determine your identity, not by stating it, but by achieving it - through your success, or your network.

But the problem with those kinds of identity, whether it's you stating it or you achieving it, is that it all depends on you. It's all about your performance and you living up to that identity. And that's a huge pressure to bear.

But look how Paul begins, v1: 'Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes.'

Now, one of the issues in the church in Corinth is that they're questioning Paul's leadership. So Paul begins by stating it - he's an apostle. But look where he places that authority: 'Called by the will of God.'

So, he's not an apostle by his own choice. Paul was perfectly happy in his old life, persecuting Christians, until God broke in, and gave him a new identity, a new calling.

Now, maybe you're one of those people who struggle with Paul, because you think he's arrogant. He's not. He's confident. But his confidence isn't in himself. It's in God and God's calling on his life; it's in his sense of vocation, which he never chose. It's his identity in Jesus that gives him his moral courage.

And notice how he calls Sosthenes his *brother*. Paul knows it's not just a new vocation he's been called to, but a new family, with God as his heavenly father. He's a man who knows he's chosen, called and, above all, loved.

And the Christian faith is the only thing that can give you an identity that doesn't depend on you, that you don't have to earn, or deserve. An identity that's received, not achieved. And that means it's the only identity that can weather the storms of life - when you don't live up to the identity you've assumed; or when the success you've built your identity on falters.

So, look at v1. If you were to write that out for yourself, what would you put? 'Martin, or … called by the will of God to be….' What? What calling has God given you? And maybe your response is, 'That's just the problem, I don't know!' But if that's the case, I'd say two things. Firstly, consider where God has placed you now - and ask yourself, are you spending too much time wanting or trying to be someone else than you are, and, instead, do you need to spend more time listening to what God has called you to do where he's already placed you, and doing it.

But secondly, look how Paul describes these Corinthian Christians, v2: 'To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.' Now, one of their problems was that they looked, and behaved, a bit too much like Corinth, and not enough like God's people *in Corinth,* which is what they were called to be. It's what every Christian's called to be: a saint. Not a

stained glass window saint. But a member of God's holy, distinct, set-apart-from-the-world people. That just as God had chosen and called Paul, so he's chosen and called them, and us, to be his special people to reflect his character to the world. A holiness, a differentness, a being loved by God-ness - an identity - that's not earned, that you don't have to try and achieve, but is given to you.

And these Corinthian Christians, and every Christian, is 'sanctified in Christ Jesus.' Made holy in him. But again, these guys looked anything but holy or different from the surrounding culture. Stuff was going on in the church that would make Netflix blush. But Paul isn't talking about their performance. He's talking about their position. Who they are in Christ: Sanctified; Made holy. That's their identity. And it's that identity that has the power to transform their lives, and every life.

Ok, but if Paul begins by addressing their identity, he also begins to tackle their individualism. Verse 2 again, 'called to be saints *together with* all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.'

And today, intertwined with issues of identity is *expressive individualism*: the desire to pursue your own path, to find fulfilment by defining and then asserting who you are. To find your deepest self by looking into yourself and then expressing that to the world. And doing that is what it means to be free, because you're not surrendering to some model imposed on you by some external authority.

Now, Corinthian culture would have known nothing of 21st Century expressive individualism. Except, individuals in the church were clearly quite happy to assert their rights over others. And provided they were getting what they wanted it didn't matter how that impacted others.

As we were talking about this at home this week, one of my daughters told me about a philosopher she'd read who asked the question, 'what would the world look like if everyone behaved like me?' It's a question to help us be self-critical. And I tried to find who that philosopher was, but the only person I could come find who said something similar was Woody Allen. And you can decide for yourself if he's a philosopher!

But whoever said it, he or she's right aren't they? If we all live independent lives, things aren't going to go well with the world.

So look how Paul takes aim at the self-centredness that lies behind this kind of individualism, ancient and modern. You're called to be saints he tells them, '*together with* all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord…' He's reminding them that no man is an island, they're not the only believers in the world, but, as he says in v9, they've been 'called [by God] into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.'

That means they don't get to define the Christian faith, or who they are, for themselves. Instead, they, and you and I, are called into community. And expressive individualism can never create community, which is why studies say loneliness is at record levels. But the Christian faith doesn't just give you an identity, it makes you part of a community, the world-wide fellowship of God's people.

But having reminded them who they are in Christ, Paul does something surprising. He gives thanks for them.

A Gratitude for Grace not Performance

Now, whether it was their attitude to authority, or sexual ethics, or the poor, or their use of spiritual gifts, this church was seriously out of whack. And yet, Paul thanks God for them. Verse 4, 'I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus.'

Now, our current culture is marked by division and name calling. But the Christianity Paul inhabits is marked by thankfulness, even in the face of disagreement, even when things aren't the way he wants them to be. And ask yourself, who would you rather be around, a serial complainer, who's always pointing out what's wrong, or someone brimming with gratitude? And which makes you personally more happy or joyful, when you're criticising, or when you're thankful?

So what's Paul seeing in Corinth that if it was you or me writing this we might have missed? It's that he looks for and sees evidence of God's grace among them: 'I give thanks to my God… *because of the grace of God that was given you*.' So, firstly, while they, or you and I, might be pre-occupied with ourselves, Paul is looking to God. And secondly, he never loses sight of the fact that God's at work among them.

And think how that could revolutionise your attitude to church, here or elsewhere. Think how many church splits could be avoided, if instead of seeing all that's wrong, all that God *isn't* doing, we looked for what God *is* doing and daily thank him for it.

You see, Paul's ability to delight in God's work, even among those he disagrees with, tells you that he knew that he too was a recipient of grace.

You see, if you think, like these Corinthians thought, that God's work in us is because we're so spiritual, or pray so hard, or are doing so well, it'll make you proud and self-righteous. And you won't be able to delight in God's work in others, because you'll either think yourself superior to them, because he's clearly using you more than them, *or* you'll feel inferior, because he's not, or jealous, because you wish he was. But when you know that God is at work through you and them because of his grace, it fills your heart with gratitude and joy, because he even uses people like us!

But secondly, Paul can have a heart full of thanksgiving because his view of life is Christ centred. Look at verses 4-9 and you'll see that Paul mentions Jesus in every verse.

Now, you guys know the power of branding. You know the power of putting a well-recognised name to something - whether it's a mark like Nike, or a person like Federer. Well, for Paul the name that clinched every deal was Christ. And he can look at these Corinthians and know that God has shown them grace *in Christ Jesus*.

And five times he mentions Jesus because these Corinthians knew they were spiritually rich. No one had to tell them that! What they were in danger of forgetting was that it's in Christ, not in themselves, that they're rich. And in all their jostling for position, and self-promotion, he's letting them know that the only name that really matters is Christ. Not theirs.

So as you assess your life, is the bent of your life inward, pointing towards yourself, or outward, to Christ? If it's inward, you'll become increasingly self-absorbed. It's only in Christ, and centring yourself on him, that you can know a certainty of being chosen and called and loved and like these Corinthians, *enriched*, while also making you humble, because it's by grace, not your performance.

But thirdly, Paul is filled with gratitude because he knows how everything is going to end. Verses 7-9, ‘You are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful.’

When you watch a film for the first time and you can be on the edge of your seat, wondering, how is this going to work out? And the tension is sky-high. But watch it again, when you already know the ending, and all that tension’s gone.

And Paul sees all of life, with all its complexities, in the light of eternity. And however bad things are there in Corinth now, he knows that on the last day they’ll be blameless. Not because they are blameless, in themselves, but because in Jesus they are. So his confidence isn’t in them, or even in his ability to sort out their problems, his confidence is in God’s faithfulness. He knows that God has started his work in their lives, and he knows he’ll see it through.

And if you’re a Christian, you know how the film ends. You know that God is working everything for your good. So, when your heart’s weighed down by what’s going on in your family, or the world, remind yourself of how this is going to finish. As Martin Luther said, ‘it is faith in God’s faithfulness that has the power to make you glad, and bold and happy.’

But thirdly and finally, Paul calls them to unity.

A Community United not Divided
One result of our individualistic and identity driven culture is the discord you see daily in the news. And Paul saw something similar infecting the church in Corinth. People were gathering around slogans and under the banners of favoured leaders: v12, ‘Each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.”

And because Paul never critiques any of these other leaders’ teaching, these divisions weren't down to doctrinal differences between them. Instead, people are using the names of these different leaders as proxies, to score points off each other, or boast about themselves, or major on style over substance. So, at root, these divisions are about power, about who has the upper hand, about who can look down on who.

Which is why Paul includes those who are saying, “I follow Christ”. Because you’d think that would be what Paul would want everyone to say, wouldn’t you? But imagine the scenario: some of them are watching all the politicking and the point scoring and the man-centredness of it all, and they think, ‘no way!’ But, in response, they become a bit spiritually elitist: they’re above all this stuff, and, sadly, just like the others, they’re also beginning to look down on the others.

It’s sad, but true isn’t it: being right doesn’t necessarily make you more loving or humble. You can be right about abortion, or sexual identity, or social justice, or marriage, or COVID, you can see the problem and correctly diagnose it, but being right doesn’t necessarily make you gentle or kind or humble or teachable.

So what can? Well, Paul tackles these divisions in three ways.

Firstly, he points them to the supremacy of Christ. Verse 10, 'I appeal to you, brothers, *by the name of our Lord Jesus*…' He's not basing this on his own opinion, or position. He's saying, listen, we're Christians, all of us have one Lord, and it's not Caesar, but neither is it me, or any other celebrity pastor. It's Christ.

The problem with the secular world, of course, is that having abandoned ultimate truth, there is no ultimate to appeal to. There is no Lord. So all you can do is try and outshout those you disagree with. Identity politics and individualism can never bring an end to the divisions they cause. But Christianity does offer you that ultimate - not in a political position, but in a person. We're Christians Paul is saying, and Christ is our Lord.

Secondly, he calls them to unity, not uniformity. Verse 10 again, 'I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.' Now, later on Paul talks about showing grace to those you disagree with. So while Paul knows there is only one truth he also gets that this side of eternity there are going to be disagreements on truths that are less important.

And unity is not uniformity. In a choir, if everyone sings the same note, it's ok, but when they sing harmonies it's incredible. So even when we cannot agree, there is a way to live together, an attitude of mind, that's united not divided, and it's beautiful.

Because, thirdly, he takes them to the cross. Verse 17, 'For Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.' And seeing Christ dying for your sins, because he loves you, is the thing that has the power to both humble you and leave you absolutely secure. Concentrating on style over substance, or being entrenched in identity politics can never do that for you. Only the cross can leave you absolutely secure in your own identity as one chosen and called and loved by God, and humble enough to love those you disagree with.