**Christ, the Cross and those Unlike You**
**1 Corinthians 11:17-34**

There's a new book out by Helen Andrews called *Boomers: the Men and Women who Promised Freedom and Delivered Disaster* - and I haven't read it, but I read a review of it this week that left me wanting to read it! Because apparently she writes that, 'The baby boomers' - those born between 1945-1964 'have been responsible for the most dramatic sundering' - the most dramatic tearing apart 'of Western Civilisation since the Protestant Reformation'. Which is quite a claim! And the review says that in the book she takes a critical and humorous look at some famous Baby Boomers and makes the case that the effect they had on the world was, ironically, totally contrary to their intentions. Steve Jobs of Apple fame, wanted to liberate everyone's inner rebel, but instead has left us chained to gadgets and enslaved to social media. Sonia Sotomayer of the US supreme court, and Al Sharpton the social activist, wanted to empower the oppressed but have ended up empowering new oppressors; the economist Jeffrey Sachs wanted to end colonialism, but in doing so has imposed a new, economic colonialism.

And in response to reading it, the reviewer, himself a Baby Boomer writes, 'I am supremely grateful to Andrews [the author] for confirming that we are bad, bad people… What a mercy we'll be going soon.'!

Now, whatever you think of that, what caught my eye is that you can be doing something you think is really good, and it actually be causing far more harm than good.

And in today's passage, Paul says that's exactly what was going on in Corinth when they came together as church.

**A Body Divided**
Look at v17, 'When you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.' And v18, 'When you come together as a church…'

And the word Paul uses for church is the word *ekklesia*. And the reason Paul uses it is it was the word the Greek translation of the Old Testament used for the assembly of God's people Israel. Plus it was the word the Greeks used for the gatherings of their citizens - their political assemblies. Think of how some cantons in Switzerland take their votes in the public square - that's the equivalent of the Greek *ekklesia*.

And that's what 'church' means - the assembly, the coming together of God's people.

But, when the church at Corinth came together, it was for the worse, not the better: v18 again, 'When you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you.'

And those divisions were about how the rich were treating the poor - 'those who have nothing' (v22). They were social, not theological. And yet, if you think about it, all social divisions are ultimately theological, aren't they? Because they tell us what we really believe, about God and about our fellow men and women made in his image.

It's why Paul says in v19, 'There must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognised.' And theologians have debated, is Paul being sarcastic? That it's the

desire of some of them to be *recognised*, to be the top dogs, that's causing divisions? Well, maybe, but more likely he's saying that there are times when God takes controversy and the divisions that come from it, and works out his purposes through it; to bring stuff to light that needs to be addressed, to make it clear what the truth is, to expose people's genuine spiritual character so change can happen.

And when this church gathered it was exposing who was 'genuine'; who was tried and tested; who was the real deal. And difficulties and trials can do that, can't they? They have this power to reveal what we really believe about God and about others.

And in Corinth it was revealing what those with more social status and wealth, really thought about the poor, even the poor in their own church. The poor who were their Christian brothers and sisters.

Verses 20-22: 'When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?' Or as the Message translation puts it, 'some are left out, others have to be carried out, too drunk to walk.'

Now, what was going on?! Well, there were no church buildings yet, so the church would normally have met in people's houses. And especially those of the richer, wealthier members, with more social status, or had the space.

And those kind of Roman houses had two rooms were meals would happen. There was the *atrium*, where the owner's and guests' slaves or children or clients would eat. And depending on the size, you could fit maybe 30 people in there. And that's likely where churches met. But leading off the atrium was the *triclinium*, the dining room. And there the owner and his guests would recline on couches around a table - and you could fit up to 10 in there.

And what seems to have been happening in Corinth, when the church gathered and shared the Lord's supper, is that they'd do it as part of a meal, but the owner, and other wealthy members would go and recline in the triclinium, leaving everyone else, the poor and their slaves who'd also become Christians, out on the atrium. Because that's just what you did, culturally. And the food would have gone to the triclinium first, and those in the atrium weren't even getting a look in. Those higher up the food chain were having a feast - and the poor and the hungry got nothing.

Think of when you fly. This is a church segregated into business and economy class. And those in business get the full, gold-plated service; while those in cattle class don't even get a sandwich.

And Paul is saying, 'You think that's church? You think that's the Lord's supper? Since when has the Lord's supper been about the host deciding who's more welcome or more socially honoured than others?! Who are you kidding?'

You see, these well-to-do Christians in Corinth, shaped by their culture, did not see their fellow Christians who were poor as their equals. Something else, their social class, their culture, how identity was tied up with wealth, trumped what God says. And in their disregard for them, they shamed them.

So, you can be doing something religious, even overtly Christian; you can be going through the ritual, and God look at it and say, no. That's not real prayer, that's not genuine worship, that's not the Lord's supper you're taking - because this is all about you.

Now you are unlikely to ever be in a church where people are carried out drunk after communion. But it's very possible to be in a church where people are divided along social or racial or political or intellectual lines. Because culture, or what you most value, or what your identity is based on is more determinative for you, than Christ. And we can see people as like us or not like us, as in or out, as worthy of my time or not.

So, if we're not to fall into the same trap we need something that's going to change the way we see and treat people *un*-like us.

**A Cross-Shaped Culture**

Now, if you are unlucky enough to live in Australia and get bitten by a snake, what do they do? They rush you to hospital and give you a shot of anti-venom. Well, sin has this ability to make us self-absorbed, and we don't notice those out in the atrium. So we need an anti-venom, an antidote to turn us outward.

And in v23-26 Paul reminds us of the events of Jesus last supper. And he's not doing this to pass on a bit of historical teaching, or so they use the right words in their worship service. He's doing it to apply Jesus' death to their social situation. He's taking the gospel and saying, 'guys, this is what should be shaping the way you think of and treat each other - especially those unlike you.'

Verses 23-24, 'For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you."'. 'On the night when he was betrayed.' So even when Jesus knew his life was under imminent threat, when one of his closest friends was going to turn on him, he wasn't looking out for himself. He wasn't self-absorbed. Instead, he enacts the ultimate act of selfless giving - 'this bread - is like the breaking of my body soon to happen on that cross - and it's for you.' And Paul is saying, let how Jesus treated others - even us - and how you are treating others - even your brothers and sisters - let that contrast sink in.

And then Paul says, v25, 'In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood."' Remember how in the Old Testament - the Old Covenant - God gave Israel sacrifices to atone for their sins. And how the animal became a substitute for the person - the animal's life - represented by its blood - given in exchange for the person's life.

And Jesus is saying, 'All those sacrifices were pointing to me. I'm the ultimate sacrifice to end all sacrifices. And your sinfulness, selfishness, and self-absorption demand a price. But I will pay it for you. My life for your life.'

It's the New Covenant God that said through the prophet Jeremiah that he'd bring in: Jeremiah 31, "Behold… I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah… I will put my my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people… they shall all know me, *from the least of them to the greatest*… For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.' (Jer 31:31-34).

You see, how do we tend to think we win people's approval? By our efforts, or our character, by earning it and proving ourselves, by achieving recognition in our field - whatever that field is. And we can think that's how we get God's approval - that he will say of us, 'I approve of you, you're ok, I'll bless your life' by what we do, or who we are, by having a great social conscience, or giving to charity, or holding the right political views.

But when you think like that it inevitably leaves you looking down on those who haven't achieved what you have, or who aren't like you. It leaves you thinking you're better than those out in the atrium, or those living it up in the triclinium.

Instead, Jesus says, 'It comes through me. I'm the new covenant. It's through me that you'll find forgiveness.' You see, it's only by knowing that salvation and justification - God accepting you and welcoming you and approving of you - is by grace, by what Jesus has done for you, and not by what you do, or who you are, that you'll ever be humbled, and see that neither you, nor anyone else, is worthy of that grace, but neither is anyone beyond that grace.

You see, if these guys failed to see their brothers and sisters out in the atrium, Jesus saw us. And at the cross, he was looking out for the interests of those utterly unlike him. Because all of us are out in the atrium, we're all poor and hungry and enslaved. And it's as if Jesus leaves the ultimate triclinium, he leaves all the privileges and comfort of heaven and says, I see you, and I come out to you, and I will serve you and feed you and free you, by giving myself for you.

And that's the culture that should shape you, Paul says.

**Remembering and Proclaiming**

Now, how many serves or returns do you think Roger Federer has practised over his career? Or Johnny Wilkinson, England's greatest fly-half - how could he kick like a metronome? How did their skills become instinctive? Even reflexive? Or think of a professional musician. How can they run off their scales without even thinking? Answer: practice. When everyone else was in the bar, or in bed, they were out practicing, until it became a part of them.

And every year, every Jewish family would practise the feast of Passover, so that every Jewish child would have it engrained in them God has delivered us from slavery. That they would remember that.

And it was at that Passover meal that Jesus broke the bread and said, v24, "Do this in remembrance of me." And v25, "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 'Because I'm the true and ultimate Passover. I'm the one who saves and delivers you from slavery. Do this, practice this, to remind yourselves every time, that this is what I have done for you.'

Because it's not just a mental reminder is it? He doesn't just say, every time you get together mentally picture the cross, does he. He makes it physical. Take bread, break it, eat it; take a cup, hold it, drink it. He's making it physical. Why? Because it's by repeated practice that something becomes a part of you, that something becomes second nature to you. Because it's then that what Jesus has done for us and how he has treated us will instinctively shape how we see and treat others. Because it makes the gospel a part of us. Because every time you eat and drink you're reminding yourself, you're preaching to yourself, proclaiming to yourself, Christ died for me, and he died for them; he died for me, and he died for them.

In CS Lewis' book, the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Edmund, one of the Pevensey children, gets into Narnia and meets the White Witch - the queen. And she gives him some of her food - Turkish Delight. The problem is when you eat the queen's food, you're hooked. You become one of hers. It changes the way you see Narnia. And that's what happens to Edmund. Even to the point of betraying his brother and sisters. And when he secretly leaves Mr and Mrs Beaver's dinner table, to do just that, and they realise he's gone, Mr Beaver says, I knew it! "He had the look of one who has been with the Witch and eaten her food. You can always tell them if you've lived long in Narnia, something about their eyes."

You know, there's something about our culture, about the world, that's like eating the witch's food. And Paul is saying, 'Come to the Lord's table and eat the king's food.' Let his food and his drink be what shapes the way you see the world. Because the Lord's supper doesn't just look back to what Jesus has done, but forward to what he's going to do.

Verse 26, 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes*.' Until the King returns, and calls his people, rich and poor, great and small, to join him around the greatest of all banquet tables- the table where there will be no divisions. And every wrong will be made right.

So, Paul says, when you come together around the Lord's table, examine yourself.

**Look In and Look Up**

Look at v27: 'Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.' Now while all sin has consequences, some sins have consequences in this life, don't they. And to behave as they had been behaving certainly did. Verse 29: 'For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.'

Fail to discern the body, fail to see in the Lord's Supper the representation of Christ sacrificing himself for us; fail to see your brothers and sisters as one body with you, and that Christ's body was broken so our social divisions might be mended; that his body was torn apart that we might be brought together, treat it as a trivial thing, and you're putting yourself in danger, says Paul. The very thing that symbolises the cross that saves you will become a thing that brings judgment down on you. Verse 30, 'That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.'

Now, you might think - isn't that a bit harsh, that people start falling sick because of this? Well, suffering can have a strange effect on us, can't it? Suffering, things not going well in your life, has this power to wake us up, to give us a jolt, to get us to reconsider things, and we see things that are out of whack that before we failed to see. Plus, we begin to realise our vulnerability.

When I was a boy my mother disciplined my brother and I with the wooden spoon. And just the sound of that wooden spoon rattling in the utensil pot as she pulled it out was enough to reduce us to silence. Or think of getting a speeding fine. There's nothing like having to pay up to make you watch your speed. But that's the point of discipline, isn't it - not that you receive it, but you want to avoid it.

And Paul is saying that like any loving Father, our heavenly Father disciplines us. And he's been discipling these guys in Corinth so they avoid the far worse, final, ultimate judgment: v32, 'But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.'

So, as you come to the Lord's table, Paul says, examine yourself. Look inside. Verse 28, 'Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.' He's not putting up a standard of perfection, a wall so high you can't climb over it. He's saying, ask yourself, are you attitudes to what you're about to do, and to others, consistent with what the Lord's Supper is all about. Look in. But then look up. Look to Christ dying for you. Because when Paul says, 'so eat of the break and drink of the cup' it's an invitation to come. To come and find fresh grace. Because the whole point is not that you have it all together, but that you don't - but Jesus does.

And as you come, and as the gospel becomes second nature to you, it will transform the way you see those unlike you, those out in the atrium, or those over there in the triclinium. Verse 33, 'So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, *wait for one another*.' And that verb 'wait for' is the same Paul uses in Romans 15:7 from our responsive reading earlier: 'Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.'

In other words, when you gather, welcome one another, prefer one another, look out for one another. You may be very different to one another socially, but you are one in Christ Jesus.