Faith, the Spirit, the Cross
1 Corinthians 2:1-16

We're looking at Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and today at that passage just read to us. And one of the things we see as we go through this letter is that as a Christian it's possible to be more shaped by your surrounding culture, in the way you see life, than by the gospel of Christ.

Now, up until the last 20-30 years or so, in the West that might not have been such a problem, because our Western societies have been broadly shaped by a Judea-Christian world view. But those days are increasingly over. And the situation we find ourselves in is becoming much more like the one Paul, and these Christians in Corinth found themselves in, where the God of the Bible is just one among many gods, and Christianity is just one among many world views, and not even one to be respected. Where the way the world sees life, or what it values, are at odds with Christianity. And that means, as these early Christians discovered, you've got to be ready and willing to be different, to swim against the tide of your culture, to embrace the embarrassment of being a Christian, if you want to follow Christ.

So, I want to put three questions to you this morning from this passage: Firstly, what is your faith based on? Secondly, what spirit is shaping you? And thirdly, as a result of those two, what kind of person are you?

What is Your Faith Based On?
Now, first impressions count, don't they? You may wish they didn't, but they do. It's why if you're going for a new job you work up your resumé so it looks good; it's why you think about what you're going to wear to the interview and prepare yourself beforehand. Or, it's why if you're going out on a first date with that special someone, you brush your teeth.

So, why does Paul behave the way he does when he first visits Corinth?

You see, Corinth was all about impressions and how you came across. It was this thriving, rich, energetic commercial hub. And impressions and how others saw you, and assessed you mattered - especially if you wanted to make it big on the public stage. As we saw last week, when it came to their public speakers, they wanted showmanship and rhetorical brilliance - the sort of speaking that moved and excited people. That was what they considered wise, clever. That was what was to be applauded.

So, if your average Corinthian was going along to the public square to hear the latest travelling speaker whose just arrived in Corinth, some Jewish guy called Paul, how's he going to judge him? He's going to compare him to all the other celebrity speakers he gets to hear, isn't he.

And yet, Paul refuses to play that game: v1, 'And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech and wisdom.' He didn't try and win them over with the tricks he knew would naturally appeal to them. In fact, he took a deliberate decision not to go down the road of seeming intellectual or oratorical brilliance: v2, 'For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.' So in a city that's built on success and ambition, and to people who are looking to be impressed, Paul goes in there determined to preach about a man who has been crucified. And as we saw last week, crucifixion is anything but impressive. It is the polar opposite of success and ambition.

So why does Paul do it? Because, if any of these Corinthians are going to become Christians and follow Christ, he wants their faith to be grounded on the right thing. Verse 5, 'so that, your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.'

You see, Paul knows that everyone lives by faith in something. Paul, the pagans at Corinth, you and me, all of us live by faith, we all put our trust in something.

Maybe you're here and you think well, I don't really believe in this God thing, I'm an atheist or at least an agnostic. But that is itself an act of faith, because you cannot prove the non-existence of God. So being an atheist or agnostic is to take a faith position on these issues - and such a person is putting their faith in their own, or others wisdom and understanding.

But someone else, a secular person, might say, 'look that's all too philosophical for me. I don't spend my time debating 'is there a God or not?' I just get on with enjoying life.' But that's also a faith position, because it's saying, 'I believe this is the way to the good life I want: pursuing what I want out of life, believing in myself, having a good time, that's the way to happiness.' But those are all beliefs, that this, rather than anything else, is the way to the life you want.

So everyone lives by faith in something. And Paul is saying, when I first came to you, I wanted to ensure that if you became Christians you put your faith in Christ for right and not wrong reasons. That your faith was based not on the wisdom of men, on the things your surrounding culture say matter, but on the power of God. And for Paul, the cross, Christ crucified, is the power of God.

So, it's not just atheists, or agnostics, or the undecided secular person who puts their faith in the wrong thing, so too can Christians, Paul is saying. Your faith can rest more in what's culturally acceptable, what your friends, neighbours, colleagues say is right, or in style and show, in your favourite, anointed preacher or celebrity pastor, than in the weakness and the offence of the cross.

Now, as we'll see later in the letter, Paul is willing to become all things to all men that he might win people to Christ, and yet he won't be conformed to what the pagans around him think is acceptable if that compromises the gospel - and in particular, the upside down power of the cross. So he deliberately chooses not to go down the path of spin or to carefully cultivate his image. All the other travelling speakers were more than happy to promote themselves, but Paul won't, because he doesn't want their faith to rest in him, in rhetorical skill or human wisdom, but in Christ crucified for them.

You see, if your life *is* based on you pursuing the good life, or on how others see you, or if your faith is based on being acceptable to the surrounding culture, or you being entertained at church, what happens when that good life comes crashing down? Or your surrounding culture becomes increasingly intolerant of Christianity, or your life changes in such a way that the triumph of entertainment based church all begins to ring hollow?

Paul doesn't want their life, their faith to rest on anything that can shift. He wants their faith, your faith, my faith, to rest on the unchanging power of Christ dying for them.

So how does he come? Verse 3: 'And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling.' So Paul enters Corinth knowing he has nothing to impress the intellectual or social or cultural elite - and he has no intention of doing so. Everything, culturally and numerically, is against him. He knows he walks into that city as a cultural anomaly. And the prospect weighs on him.

And maybe you feel like that sometime: you're a Christian and you just know you don't fit in, that you're out of step with the world. Listen, that's how Christianity began. It's what it means to be a Christian.

But I suspect that Paul's fear and trembling is ultimately before God, because he feels the weight of proclaiming Christ and doing that from right and not wrong motives. And that weakness is in stark contrast to the showy self-confidence of all these other, popular speakers who do give people exactly what they want. But Paul's weakness fits his message, doesn't it? He knows that it's when he's weak that he's strong, that the weakness of the cross, the rejection of the world, *is* the power of God.

You see, Paul's in good company, isn't he? Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, all said, 'God I can't do this: I can't speak, I'm too sinful, I'm too young.' And maybe you feel that too. It might be standing up as a Christian, it might be doing something specific God has called you to do, it might be keeping going through a dark period in your life, and you think, I can't do this, I'm not up to this.

But the cross tells us that God works in and through weakness, because then it's God's power working and not our strength; it's then that we put our trust in him and not in ourselves; when our faith is in the right and not the wrong place.

But that message of the cross, that Christ died for our sins and self-sufficiency, is one people can never accept on their own. It's why Christians have and always will be at odds with the world. But it's also why everyone needs God to step in.

So, secondly,

What Spirit is Shaping You?
Look at v12: 'Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God.'

So there are two spirits that can shape you. There's the spirit of the world. And that's the way of thinking about life that's pervasive in society and culture, that views things like image and influence and celebrity and status as being what's valuable, what gives us worth. It's why Paul talks in v6 of 'this age' and 'the rulers of this age'. *This* age, as opposed to the age to come. And the rulers of this age are the social, cultural, political, religious structures and powers that dominate the way the world sees life.

CFD Moule, the Cambridge historian, wrote about how secular historians face an insurmountable problem. How do you explain the rise of Christianity? From a secular standpoint, how do explain the growth of the early church? - because it makes no sense. Because, Moule says, the early church rips 'a great hole in history, a hole the shape and size of the Resurrection.' That it's only the death and resurrection of Christ that can explain it. And it's through that hole punched by the cross and the resurrection that the age to come breaks into this age. Because that's the second Spirit that can shape you - God's Spirit.

And Paul is saying that you either have a spirit, a disposition, a way of seeing life, the universe, and everything that's oriented around you, and human pride and human wisdom, or you have the Spirit of God. And every Christian has received *that* Spirit, Paul says, so that, v12, 'We might understand the things freely given us by God.'

You see, up until now in this letter, Paul has been doing a demolition job on human wisdom. And so these Corinthians might be thinking, 'is there no place for wisdom in Christianity?' Or is Celsus, the Greek philosopher right when he said that Christians only welcomed the 'ignorant, or unintelligent'; that the only people worthy of the Christian God are 'the idiots, and the mean, and the stupid, and women and children'?

And Paul's response in v6: yes, 'Among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or the rulers of this age.' It's not what people shaped by the spirit of this age would think was wise, or clever, or impressive. It's the unimaginable, unthinkable blessings of salvation that God has prepared for those who love him, that were hidden from sight until Christ came. Verse 7, 'We impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.' But, if you're fixated on status and image, if you think what matters is influence and wealth, like the powers of this age, you'll never see it, you'll just think it's a nonsense. Which is why Paul says, in v8, 'None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.' It's only those who've received the Spirit of God who can understand it.

Now, in that great cultural classic, Frozen, Anna and Hans sing 'Love is an open door.' And one of the highlights is the line, 'we finish each other's … sandwiches… that's what I was going to say!' Because finishing one another's sentences is the mark of love, isn't it, of really knowing the other one.

But it can also be really irritating, can't it? Or when someone interrupts you and says, 'I know what you're going to say' and they don't.

And it's irritating because, ultimately, only you know what's going on in your head. And Paul says it's the same with God, v11: 'For who knows a persons thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.'

So God's wisdom, understanding the upside down power of the cross, is simply inaccessible to us on our own. We'll never know God's thoughts, or get 'the depths of God' as Paul calls them in v10, unless he reveals them to us. And Paul says, 'and he has!' If you don't have the Holy Spirit you can never understand it, but if you do have the Spirit, you can. And that, Paul is saying, is what it means to be *spiritual*.

Now what do you think of when you hear the word *spiritual*? Someone living on a different plane, a bit removed from the world? 'Ooh, she's so spiritual!' Someone who has more 'inner light' than others? Someone who gives off an aura of other worldliness?

When Paul talks here, and later, about people who are 'spiritual', he's probably using a term these Corinthians used. They'd moved on from all this talk about the cross, that's kindergarten stuff. Instead they were *spiritual*, mature, on-a-different-level Christians.

But Paul is saying, 'no, to be spiritual, to be mature, is to have the Spirit of God. It's not a special class of Christian, it's not that you know more than others, or live on some exalted plane, it's that you understand that the cross and resurrection of Christ changes everything and transforms every area of your life. Including what you most value, and think matters most in life.

So, if your faith can rest in human wisdom *OR* God's power, and if you can either be shaped by the spirit of the world *OR* the Spirit of God, what impact do those alternatives have on a life?

Our third question…

What kind of person are you?
A few years back we discovered the BBQ marinated chicken pieces from Aldi. I know you all shop in Globus and Manor, but there is somewhere called Aldi. And some are marinated in a Thai sauce, and some in an Indonesian sauce, and they're not just different colours, they're different flavours. Because what you soak something in is bound to affect its flavour, isn't it.

And in v14-16, Paul differentiates two types of people. The Corinthian Christians would have divided Christians up according to who they thought were the spiritual ones, living on another plane, culturally sophisticated, socially upwardly mobile, wise; and then they looked at Paul, and all this talk about the cross, and said, 'that's deficient'. But Paul cuts things differently. He doesn't divide Christians, he divides humanity. And in v14 he talks of 'The natural person' and *then* in v15 'The spiritual person.' And they're opposites.

And if the spiritual person, the Christian, has the Spirit of God and is being shaped by that Spirit; if their faith rests on the power of God and not the wisdom of man, then the natural person, the non-Christian, *doesn't* have the Spirit and *is* placing their faith in the wisdom of man.

And in v14 Paul tells us three things about the natural person, the person living life entirely on the human plane: Number 1: They don't accept the things of the Spirit; Number 2: They don't accept them because they think it's all foolishness; and Number 3: They don't understand these things because these things are spiritually discerned.

In other words, put your faith in human wisdom, think that image and influence and the way your surrounding pagan culture sees things is what matters; and you're going to be an outsider to what God is doing in Christ, through the cross. And as we'll see in this letter, these guys were in danger of behaving more like natural people than spiritual. It's always the danger.

But the spiritual person, the person whose faith *does* rest in the power of God, and who *has* received and *is* being shaped by the Spirit of God, is very different. Look at v16, at how Paul ends: '"For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?"' He's quoting the prophet Isaiah. And when Isaiah first put that question, it was rhetorical. *Obviously* no one can understand God's mind, no one can instruct him.

But look how Paul answers it, v16 again, ‘But we have the mind of Christ.’ Has anyone understood the mind of the God, Isaiah asks? Answer, yes! We - you Corinthians, me Paul, all Christians, we have the mind of Christ. Because of the Spirit, we can assess reality, we can rightly judge all things Paul says in v15, we do see how God has wired the world, we can see his way of salvation, we can see that it’s by losing your life that you find it; that its through weakness that we’re strong, that the cross of Christ is the power of God, that though the world opposes us we are chosen and loved by God; that the powers of the age to come have broken into this age and so we can live all of life in the light of the death and resurrection of Christ.

And it’s not because we are sooo spiritual, it’s because Christ’s death and resurrection has punched a hole through the ages, and he’s poured out his Holy Spirit so that all of us can be shaped by him and not by the spirit of the world.