God's Alternative in a Pagan World
1 Cor 3:1-23

We're looking at Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, which he wrote around 54AD. Which is a long time ago. Despite that, it remains hugely relevant for us, especially because of the times we live in.

I recently read one social commentator, who's not given to exaggeration, who described our societies as tearing themselves apart. Now, you don't have to agree with that to see that at least our Western societies are deeply, and increasingly divided. But the passage we're going to look at teaches us is that in just such a situation, the church is called to be a very different kind of community, even an alternative society.

The problem is that in Corinth the Christians were failing to be that alternative. And the reasons why can help us understand what's going on in our societies and how we *can be* that distinct community.

Last week, in chapter 2 we saw how Paul set up this contrast between the natural person - the non-Christian, who doesn't have the Spirit of God, and the spiritual person, the Christian, who does.

But then Paul begins chapter 3 by turning to these Corinthian Christians and saying, v1, 'But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people.' They're Christians but he can't speak to them as Christians. Why?

A Divided Community
Imagine you've been sworn in for jury duty, and you're sitting in court. And the defendant and the judge and the lawyers are all there. And the Judge strikes his gavel and the case begins and the prosecution lawyer stands and says 'm'lord, I'm going to present the jury with evidence that will prove the defendant is guilty.' And he holds up Exhibit A: a gun, and the defendant's fingerprints are all over it.

And that's what Paul's doing in v3-4: He's holding up exhibit A in his case against these Christians: 'While there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh, behaving only in a human way? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?'

Here's the evidence that you really are guilty of what I'm accusing you of: you're jealous of each other, there's strife among you, you're plagued by divisions. You're gathering under slogans and banners, using my name, or Apollos' name, to score points off of each other, claiming you're more spiritual, wiser, more culturally savy - in other words, better people - than these others.

That's the evidence. But what are their divisions evidence of? What's the charge? It's that they're 'of the flesh', that they're 'behaving only in a human way'. And for Paul, the *flesh* is pursuing life independent of God, it's living life without reference to God and for your own ends. So, while they think they're really spiritual, in reality, they're behaving just like everyone else. They're just as consumed by issues of power and status and image and tribalism as the pagans around them.

It's why he starts the way he does, v1 again, 'But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.' So when Paul was with them, they had genuinely become Christians, they were 'in Christ', but they were *infants in Christ*.

And since he's left them, nothing's changed. Spiritually, morally, in the way they see life, and status, and power, and worth, they're still in nappies, they're still wearing diapers.

They think they're spiritual, but behave like people who aren't, because they're measuring their spirituality by who they're following, whose banner they're grouping under. And as one commentator writes, that's not a sign of their spiritual *perception*, but their spiritual *poverty*. They think their divisions are proof that they know more than that group o*ver there*, that they're wiser, more on the right side of history than them. And Paul's saying, it's the opposite. These divisions are not a sign of your maturity but your immaturity.

And that affected what he could teach them, v2: 'I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh.'

And so far in the letter, Paul's been emphasising that the cross is the power of God: power for salvation *and* power for life transformation. So it's not a change of diet these guys need. It's not as if the death and resurrection of Jesus is like pureed spinach that you feed to some poor unsuspecting baby, but once they're older Paul's going to give them something better, like steak. It's that they need to see and understand how the cross has the power to transform every area of life. Including power and status. And that's going to be crucial if they're going to be the embassy of God in a pagan world that they're called to be.

A Different Community

Look at v5-6: 'What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.' And Paul uses two metaphors to describe the church. And the first is the church as a field, a farm. And these Corinthians were trying to win status over each other, and put each other down, by aligning with Apollos, who was a great speaker, or Paul, who probably wasn't. But Paul's response is, 'What then is Apollos? What is Paul? *Servants*.' We're servant leaders. In fact, given the metaphor, farm labourers.

And when Paul says that he planted and Apollos watered, he uses a Greek verb tense that's time-limited. The action happens and then it stops. But for 'God gave the growth' he uses the imperfect tense - God gave and *continues to give* the growth. In other words, leaders like me and Apollos, we're just servants, farm labourers, in fact in v7 he says, 'Neither he who plants nor he who waters is *anything*, but only God who gives the growth' - we're nothing, in comparison to God we're nobodies, *and* we come and go, we're passing away, but God's the farmer, he's the growth giver, and his work never ends.

And everything belongs to him: Verse 9, 'For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field. God's building.' And can you see how the emphasis is all on God? Because if you wanted to translate it super-literally, you'd say something like, '*God's* co-workers we are; *God's* field, *God's* building you are.'

So, in the church, in the community of God's people, leaders are servants, and they and the people they serve, belong to God. So can't you see, Paul is saying, how *im*mature, how *un*spiritual it is, to divide into parties, using our names, to try to gain power and status over each other, rather than uniting under the one name that matters, the one to whom we all belong?

But then Paul switches metaphors: v10, 'According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it.'

So not only does Paul know that he and every leader is a servant. He also knows he's only that by God's grace. And knowing that you're a servant, and that God has only chosen you because he's merciful and kind to people like you who don't deserve it, just has this power to pull the rug of pride from under you, doesn't it? And when Paul calls himself a skilled master builder, he uses a term for a foreman, a managing architect on a building site, co-ordinating a whole team of builders. By God's grace to a man who doesn't deserve it he's a servant, *and* he's not a one man band.

Now, whereas before he mentioned Apollos, a member of the building team, by name, now he doesn't. He doesn't want to give any impression of criticising Apollos. Because it's not Apollos who's the problem. And just imagine if he did appear to criticise Apollos, those in the 'I follow Paul' camp, would be going 'told you so, we're right and you Apollo followers are wrong.'

Instead, Paul generalises it: v10 again, 'I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. *Let each one* take care how he builds on it.' So this is for anyone - then and now - who has any leadership in the church, or anyone who has any influence on anyone else in the church. Take care how you build, he says.

And the first thing he points to is the foundation: v11, 'For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.' In other words, you can't rip up the foundation and start again. Even if the surrounding culture is saying, 'this is what you should be about, this is what's really important', you can't try and shift the church so it's about something other than Christ crucified and risen. And any subsequent building work has got to fit that foundation.

In our village they've been rebuilding one of the old buildings. They knocked it down to the foundation and then started again. But funnily enough, the new building matches the old foundation. Because what would happen if they decided, 'let's build a couple of new floors *off* the foundation'? It'll collapse. And Christ is the foundation, so it's going to be him who gives the building its shape, its structure, its strength.

And the reason anyone building on that foundation, and contributing to the life of the church, should take care how they build, is that there's going to come a day when *how* we've built will be tested.

Verses 12-13: 'Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw - each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.' Now gold, silver and precious stones are fireproof, aren't they? Put them through the fire and they come out the same or maybe even better, purer. But wood, hay and straw, put them in the fire and what are you left with? Ash.

And Paul's saying, there's going to come a day, Judgment Day, when our methods and motives, the way each of us have built, will be tested. And you want what you're doing to survive that test.

Now, if someone does build wonky, because it was really all about them and not Christ, or because what they taught or pushed for, while not exactly heretical, wasn't in line with the gospel either, they'll still be saved, Paul says in v15: 'If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved but only as through fire.'

But none of us want that to be us, do we? I mean, you don't want to come out of Judgment Day smelling of smoke, do you? You don't want your leadership, or the influence you've had on others, or all those hours you've invested in church, to go up in smoke, do you? Instead, just like these guys in Corinth, we're given the opportunity of investing our lives, as part of a team, in building something that does last the fire, something of eternal significance in the lives of others that does pass the test.

And look why he says we should do that: v16, 'Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?' In other words, 'hey, you do know who you (plural) are, don't you? You do understand your identity, together, don't you? Because you're not just any old building there in Corinth, or Lausanne. You're not a parliamentary chamber where the members are trying to score cheap political points off of each other. You're not a university campus discussing the latest ideas. You're not a day-time television studio enjoying the latest gossip. You're God's temple.

Now, later on, Paul will say that each of us, individually, is a temple, but not yet. For now, he's talking about the gathered community. Surely, you understand you're God's temple, that God's Spirit dwells among you.

And Corinth was full of temples to one god or another. The gods of power and sex and commerce and harvest. And walk the streets of any Western city and you'll find temples to the same gods, won't you, - they're just labelled differently. But in Corinth, there was only one temple to the one true God, and it's them, the church - God's alternative community in Corinth. The gathering of his people.

And the problem is, with all their divisions, and factions, they were in danger of desecrating that temple. Verse 17, 'If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.'

So, in a world of discord and division, of status seeking and power plays, the local church is holy, set apart by the Holy Spirit, to be the place where, among a whole pantheon of gods, the One true God is worshipped, where people can encounter the only One who can really give us what deep down we're all seeking.

And Paul's warning to leaders and influencers is stark. Get taken up with status, and image, and power; depart from the gospel, and become indistinguishable from the world, and you do untold damage to the church. And it's not just that such people will escape smelling of smoke, they won't escape at all.

Which is deeply sobering. But Paul doesn't leave it there. Instead, he ends with a vision so extraordinary that it both humbles you and lifts you up; it both silences you, and opens your mouth in praise.

The Power of Belonging

And in v18 Paul reminds them, don't get sucked into the kind of thinking of 'this age' - where you think that image, or power, or what your surrounding culture says is to be applauded, is what's wise, what's right. Because to be stuck in the thinking of 'this age' really is to be on the wrong side of history.

Instead, he says, v18, let such a person 'become a fool that he may become wise.' Let the foolishness of God - the upside down power of the cross - mould you.

The question is, how can you do that? How can you see leadership as service, and not self-advancement? How can you see yourself as nothing and God as everything, and do that with joy, in a culture that says you're everything, and God is nothing? How can you live with eternity and judgment in view and that energise you, not paralyse you?

Well, look how Paul ends. He turns their slogans on their heads. You see, they're taking pride in which clique, which party, they belong to - I'm an Apollos man, I'm a Paul woman, I'm a Cephas guy. And Paul says, v21-22, 'Let no one boast in *men*. For *all things are yours*, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas.' It's not that you belong to this or that leader's group, it's that these leaders belong *to you*. And not just the leaders: v22, 'All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas *or the world or life or death or the present or the future - all are yours.*'

So in all their divisions and running after what their culture said mattered, they've missed the fact that God has given them *everything* and works in and through *everything* for their good. That every leader, every phase and circumstance of life, God has given to you, and is at work in them for your benefit. They're consumed with jostling for position and prominence, and Paul's saying, 'Oh, stop looking down; look up, see what God has done for you - all of life is yours!'

And not because they're so impressive or spiritual. Verses 22-23: 'All are yours, *and you are Christ's* and Christ is God's.' The blessing of having multiple leaders you can learn from; the blessing of knowing that in all things God is working for your good, belong to you because you belong to Christ.

And that's what gives a status, a secure sense of self-worth, that's not dependent on you being better than others and putting others down. That's what's of true value, that in his grace he's made you his.

And you can lead by serving, because you know that Christ, who you belong to, came not to be served but to serve. You can rejoice in being nothing and God being everything because you know Christ loves you so much he became nothing for you. You can live with eternity and final judgment in view, knowing that one day your life and work will come to an end, and be energised not paralysed by because you know that at the cross Christ has already taken the judgment for you, that for the joy set before him - with eternity in view - he endured the cross and scorned its shame, and is sat at God's right hand waiting to reward you.

And that's the power of the cross in the power of belonging to Christ. In his commentary on this passage, Gordon Fee writes that, in the wisdom of God, 'wisdom is folly, and weakness is power, and leaders are servants, and God's people are nobodies and yet they posses everything.' Because Christ possesses them. Because we belong to Christ.

And, Paul ends, Christ is God's. These Corinthians are split into all these factions, thinking that they're better than each other. But there are no factions in God, Paul says. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are One, united in loving community.

And it's that unity in diversity that God's people, then and now, are called to reflect to a divided and strife filled world. That through the upside down power of the cross, we serve one another, we build one another up, we live with eternity in view, and we can do it with joy, not because we're someones, but because we're no-ones who belong to someone.