One thousand six hundred years ago, a bishop in what is now Algeria, published a book that caused a stir then and which, since then, has become one of *the* most influential books ever written.

And it is, of course, Augustine's City of God: *The City of God Against the Pagans*. It was the first time anyone had undertaken a full-on critique of the culture in which they lived.

And in it, Augustine contrasts two cities - the City of Man, and the City of God, and he argued that those two cities co-exist, and live mingled together, and will do so until the end. And in his day, the City of Man was represented by Rome and Roman culture. And line by line Augustine shows how the glory of Rome, and everything the culture boasted in, was really a glory of self, and a lust, a desire for domination. But the City of God, the community of God's people, gloried in Christ and far from being controlled by a desire to dominate, it is motivated by self-sacrifice and humility and service of others.

And Augustine's point was, you're going to live as a citizen in one or other of those cities. In one whose love is directed toward God, or in the other whose love is directed towards self.

And the reason his work has stayed so influential is that nothing much has changed. The name we give to the culture might change, the identities of those who do the dominating might be different, but the underlying principles, and the things that drive it, have not. There is still the City of Man - glorying in self, and seeking power, even if that is just the power to decide for yourself who you want to be and to self-create. Or the City of God - the community of God's people, the church, who live for his glory and his love and who humble themselves in lives of self-sacrificial service.

But where did Augustine get those kind of ideas from? Well, from passages like the one we had read to us from 2 Corinthians 4. And today and next Sunday we're taking a break from John's gospel and at the start of this year, we're gong to consider the kind of lives, as individuals, and as a church, that the Lord calls us. How in our day we're to live as the City of God in the midst of the City of Man. And live lives of service, in community, to the glory of God.

And today, we're going to look predominantly at the community part, and next week at the service part.

So today I want us to see four things. Four characteristics of the community you and I are called to be a part of. Firstly, the church is a community confident in trials. Secondly it's a community that proclaims Christ, not ourselves; thirdly, it glories in God, not man; and fourthly it views life, and what you do with it, from the vantage point of eternity. And all of us are invited to live as citizens of that city, that community.

Firstly, the church is a community
Confident in Trials
Now sometimes it's worth stating the obvious, and that is that Paul's writing to a local church. Chapter 1:1, 'Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus… to the church of God that is at Corinth.' And if you know anything about first century Corinth - you'll know it was something like a cross between Geneva, Lausanne, and Las Vegas. Where nobody gave a second thought to the pursuit of sex or wealth or sporting prowess, because that's just what you did. But it was also where this church was trying to live out what it meant to be disciples of Christ.

Look how Paul begins the passage, v1: ‘Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.’ And to understand the ministry he’s talking about, you have to go back to chapter 3 and how Paul contrasts the ministry of God’s *law*, through Moses, that brought condemnation, because it made people aware of just how far short of God’s standard they fell, and the ministry of righteousness and the gospel of God’s grace. That now, through faith in Christ, you and I can be counted righteous before God - not because we’ve finally mastered how to keep God’s rules, but because Christ has kept them for us and, at the cross, paid for all the times we haven’t.

And Paul is saying, because we know the truth of that gospel, we do not lose heart. We have a deep, inner confidence.

And if he starts this chapter like that, he ends it the same way. Verse 16, ‘So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.’

But why state that? What was going on that losing heart and giving up or getting down might have been an option?

Well, as someone once said, ‘everyone suffers, you just have to live long enough.’ And here in v16, Paul describes it as ‘our outer self… wasting away.’ While in verse 8 he talks of being ‘afflicted in every way, *but not crushed*’ of being ‘perplexed, *but not driven to despair*’. And what does it means to be perplexed? It means to not know why God is allowing what’s happening at the moment to happen and yet at the same time knowing he’s good, and living in the tension of that.

And yet, despite being afflicted and perplexed, Paul says, we do not lose heart. We’re afflicted - but not crushed; we’re perplexed - but not despairing.

Ok, but they’re also facing opposition. And as a community they get that they are in the middle of a spiritual battle. Verses 3-4, ‘Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case *the god of this world* has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.’ So they understand that they are not living in spiritually neutral territory. The face opposition from dark powers.

But also from people. Verse 9, Paul says, we’re ‘persecuted, *but not forsaken*; struck down, *but not destroyed*.’ Or as one translation puts it, knocked down, but not knocked out.

And yet, in the face of suffering and opposition they are not pessimistic. But neither are they triumphalistic. There’s no pretending these sufferings aren’t real. Verse 11, ‘we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake.’

What they are is confident: we do not lose heart.

Let me ask you: Do you need a dose of that? You see when you’re suffering or feel like you’re in a spiritual battle, you *can* lose heart. And maybe you read this and go, ‘yes but this is Paul talking about himself, not the average Christian in the pew in Corinth.’ Well maybe, except, when he wrote to the Philippians he said, ‘What you have learned and received *and heard and seen in me* - practice these things’ (Phil 4:9).

In other words, when like Paul we understand the gospel - the ministry of righteousness, that in Christ, by God's grace, and not because of our performance under pressure, we are loved and accepted by God, then we know, firstly, that these trials are not a punishment and secondly, that he is working all things for our good and his glory. And that gives us confidence. In this moment we might be knocked down, but in Jesus we can never be knocked out. And when we understand that, instead of losing heart, we find it.

That's the first mark of the community you and I are called into. That in face of opposition or suffering, we are confident in trials.

Secondly, the church is a community that…
Proclaims Christ - Not Ourselves
Look at v2. 'We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.'

Now, in Paul's day, and especially in somewhere like Corinth, you'd get travelling orators who'd make their buck by making eloquent speeches, regardless of whether they actually believed what they were saying or not. And Paul's saying, that's not us. We believe there is such a thing as truth, and we openly state it. We don't tamper with it, or manipulate others with it.

Now, Paul's defending his ministry. But the implication is that this attitude to the truth should mark this church and every local church - every outpost and embassy of the City of God.

But why state that? Because when you're living in a culture that's adversarial, like them; a culture that says, 'you believe what? You cannot say that', the danger is that you don't say that and instead try and make the message more palatable, and water down the truth, or try and make it say things it doesn't say, or not say things it does say. And consciously or subconsciously, you tamper with God's word.

But there's an equal and opposite error as well. That when you're in an adversarial culture, where you're constantly being opposed, you revert to proclaiming the law of condemnation not the gospel of God's grace. Because when it feels like everyone's an enemy to be nailed, then every text becomes a hammer to nail them with.

So notice what Paul does *not* say. He does not say, we proclaim the truth in such a way that everyone likes it, but neither does he take pride in proclaiming the truth in ways so that all these 'liberals' hate it - even though the gospel is always going to be offensive to some. He says they proclaim the truth, v2, in ways that 'commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.'

Now, what does it mean to commend yourself to another's conscience? It's that whether they agree, or disagree with you, they can see you're a person of integrity, that your life and works match your words.

That's the kind of truth proclaiming community we're called to be a part of.

But what's the truth? Because you could teach scientific truth or historical truth in a classroom. You could argue some uncomfortable home truths in political debate. What's the truth that we, as the church, are called to proclaim?

Verse 4, 'The gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, *but Jesus Christ as Lord*, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.'

Now it would be hard to argue that our culture is not been about proclaiming ourselves. Whether it's the posting images, or the project of self-creation, the self - myself - has taken centre stage.

But *God's* people, Paul is saying, are to be marked by something different. That as a community we proclaim Christ. And Christ as Lord. That rather than promote ourselves, we recognise someone far greater deserves that place. That rather than seeing ourselves as autonomous lords of our own lives, Christ is our Lord.

And as we acknowledge that, something happens. All the anxiety of keeping up, or fear of missing out; all the need to win or maintain approval vanishes. Because, v6, 'God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.'

Now, if I were to ask you: 'What's God's plan and purpose for your life? What's he created you for? What's your ultimate *telos*, the goal of your life?' What would you answer? The Bible says it's to know God, and have your heart lit up with that knowledge, and to see in Christ the glory of God, as you see and savour him.

And not just as an individual. You see, our current culture says, the point of your life - as far as you can ever have a point when ultimately life has no meaning - is to see and savour yourself, to discover yourself and promote and proclaim yourself.

And the truth is you can become a Christian and turn your back on that, but only partially. You realise, rightly, that Christ is the reason and end of your life, and yet still live that life as an individualist.

But the great story line of history is how, in Christ, God is redeeming for himself *a people, a community, a city, the church* to be his people, and he will be their God. Not just you and your personal relationship with Jesus. But you with everyone else - and Christ at the centre.

That's God's agenda. Now if your agenda for your life is different from that - if it's about you, as an individual, experiencing personal happiness, pleasure, or fulfilment, the danger is you're going to feel frustrated, or empty, or let down, with no means to understand the trials of life. And when trials come, you'll find yourself lashing out at God, or at others, when you think they're not working to your agenda.

But if instead you see yourself as a member of God's people, even his suffering people, growing together in our knowledge of God and worship of Christ, then life becomes increasingly about Christ and less about me.

Sarah Irving-Stonebraker is a professor of history in Australia, who was converted from a totally atheist background while doing graduate studies in Oxford. And in her recent book, *Priests of History*, she argues that not just society, but the church as well, is living in an Ahistoric Age. That is, we don't see ourselves as members of a historic people, we don't know our history and we don't learn from it or let it shape our present. And she argues that one of the ways that shows itself is that in many modern churches the emphasis is on entertainment. About you or me being entertained. And whether in the preaching, or the music that's like a concert - classical or modern, or the activities, it's about me and what I'm getting from it.

But then she quotes one of her former pastors who said, 'But the church is not a cruise ship. It's a life boat. We have a job to do.' In other words, we're not here to be entertained, instead we have a gospel to proclaim. And to proclaim, Paul says in v3, 'to those who are perishing.'

That's the second characteristic of the community we are called into. We proclaim Christ, not ourselves.

Thirdly, the church is a community that
Glories in God - Not Man
Look at v7: 'But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.'

Now if I were to ask you, 'how do you see yourself? As a priceless treasure - gold inlayed, diamond encrusted vase that if put up for an auction would sell for millions? Or a jar of clay?' I suspect some of us would go 'treasure!' And some would go 'clay'. But the truth is, however you feel about yourself, whatever thoughts come into your mind when you see yourself in the mirror, your heavenly Father says you are fearfully and wonderfully made. You are an image bearer of God and you are treasured.

But the trials of suffering and opposition - even the seeming insignificance of our daily lives - remind us, we're also jars of clay. But within those jars is the true treasure and it is the glory of God. And the fact that God uses people like us, to proclaim Christ and see lives rescued and redeemed, means he gets the glory not us.

Verse 15: 'It is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people *it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God*.' You see, it is as we gather together, as his people, in corporate worship and thanksgiving, for his rescuing and redeeming grace in Christ, that God is glorified.

And if the glory of ancient Rome was the glory of self, and if the same disease afflicts the modern West, the City of God is different. As his church, we glory in God, not man.

Because fourthly, and finally, the church is a community that…
Views Life - and what you do with it - from the Vantage Point of Eternity
Now, one of the great things about flying into Geneva, is that you get to fly over the place where you live, and you see how your village, or town, sits in relation to everything else. Or sometimes, when you're on a hike and you reach the top, and you look back and see the path from above, you finally understand why it took the turns that it did. Or spend anytime in a maze and you realise why that raised platform exists - it's the only way to see the way out.

And the same is true for life. If you're ever to understand it, if you're to see how the bits fit together or how God might be working good in your trials, or how you're to get out the other side, and what you're to spend our time doing in between, you need a view from above.

You see, what comes naturally to us is to live our lives focused on our desires, our needs, or the opportunities we have now. But we'll never make sense of life if that's how we live. Life only makes sense if you climb the mountain of God and see the path from his vantage point.

Verses 16-18: 'So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen *are transient*, but the things that are unseen *are eternal*.'

So Paul sees his and their lives - the suffering and opposition, what they're to proclaim and glory in, from the vantage point of what is to come. And that relativises everything. Being persecuted and knocked down, being afflicted in every way and feeling perplexed, all become light and momentary in the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ. Because the difficulties of today will one day pass away.

And that is not a grin-and-bear-it mentality. As Paul writes in v10, we are 'always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, *so that the life of Jesus* may also be manifested in our bodies.' In other words, it's by dying to ourselves, and our agenda and our glory, that we really start to live. As the resurrection, life-from-the-dead life of Jesus begins to work its power in our lives.

And that's a life that inevitably spills over to others: Verses 11-12: 'For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus sake, *so that* the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. *So* death is at work in us, *but life in you*.' And you've been on the receiving end of this, haven't you? As you've watched a fellow believer face something you never want to face, and yet they're dealing with it with such grace and faith that it's inspiring.

I mean, even today, some of you are going through stuff and the way you are conducting yourself works life in those of us who know. Because it's the same resurrection life of Jesus that's at work.

But it's also seeing our lives from the vantage point of eternity that explains why Paul would say, v5 again, 'What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, *with ourselves as your servants* for Jesus sake.'

Because living a life of service, and service in community, to the glory of God, makes no sense if this life is all there is and life is about maximising *my* glory. But when you see your life in the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ it's the only life that makes sense. Which is why we'll look at it next week.

So - City of Man or City of God? Live an individualistic, self-focused life of self-glory and self-creation, or one that's rooted in a community that's confident in trials, that's proclaiming Christ not ourselves, that's glorying in God not man, and that's seeing all of life from the vantage point of eternity? That's the choice. Choose the glory of God in the face of Christ.