

1 Corinthians 4: 8-13

I have a friend who can talk non-stop from here to Malpas. On the rare occasion when she might appear to be flagging, a couple of words of comment or question is all that is needed to keep her going ... though I apologise that I am still childish enough to do that!

By contrast her response to a text message, should you get one at all, is nearly always very brief – yes, no or ok!

And yet, neither of these traits of correspondence give any clue as to her character as a friend – although she can talk the hind-leg off the proverbial donkey!

I mention this because it was a thought that helped me with our letter writer Paul when I was preparing for this evening. Paul scares me – of which more in a moment – but as I recalled A.. – oops, I nearly put a name to my friend! – I realised that when I get wound up by the intensity of his written word I forget that he is totally driven by his love for the people that he is writing to. He is both passionate and compassionate.

Paul scares me because he makes me feel guilty and reading tonight's passage and those which surround it I feel like the child receiving the sharp end of the head teacher's tongue – and I was always the goody goody, never putting myself in a position where I would be told off.

Paul has been telling the Corinthians that they need to grow up – they are behaving like children in the way they approach their faith life and the way they are creating cliques. They need to remember, he says, that every skill and good thing that they have has come freely from God and these gifts are not to be boasted about but to be used in God's service.

It seems that the people of the church are quite comfortably off and are sitting back enjoying life. Paul tells them that the task of being God's servant doesn't look like that to him – he is a nobody who is often hungry, without decent clothes, treated as the scum of the earth, receiving beatings and insults – and yet, as a fool for Christ, he responds with blessings and politeness.

I am, perhaps like you, well educated, comfortably well off, fulfilling roles in a way which I hope brings me respect.

I fear that Paul would tell me that I was doing it wrong.

I looked on my bookshelves for a voice to add into my conversation with Paul and selected a book **by the Reverend Doctor Samuel Wells** called *'Learning to Dream Again'*. Sam Wells is Vicar of St Martin in the Fields and also an academic in the field of Christian ethics. (His wife is a Bishop so that must be quite some household!). The quote on the front of the book says: *'It is impossible to read this commanding book without being put on the spot and recalled to Jesus' teaching with new authenticity'* – it seemed like the sort of book I need to get me off my all too comfortable backside.

One of the first things I got my highlighter out for was a passage about team work. Wells is talking about things that sport can teach us – how practice makes us perfect and how regular training can teach us about obedience and dedication. He says of Paul's description of the church as one body with many members having different functions that he could be talking about a sports team. And church is like a team sport – it only counts if we get the whole team across the line. (p50)

I read this as meaning that you must take some responsibility for my failings and failures as I must take a **PTO**

share in yours. And we must work together to make sure that we do better next time.

I feel better already!

And it was at this point that I realised that Paul does not write to individuals – he writes to a whole church. So although I feel a personal failing when I read his tirade, as I imagine did some of those who heard the letter when it was first read, Paul is expecting them to work on sorting it out together, as a church.

When Paul is explaining how he has experienced life as a follower of Jesus, I feel sure that I could not put myself in that position. Would I stand up for Jesus if my life was threatened? **Wells** poses this question and says that as individuals we would probably succumb to our oppressor. I'm sure I would. But what, he asks, if we were part of a body that had been shaped by baptism and the Eucharist, by the holy disciplines of Lent, the history of shared struggle, the wisdom of suffering, a shared commitment of money, the solidarity that comes through forgiveness and the willingness to make sacrifices for one another – maybe then, he says, we would be prepared to stand up together for Jesus, and then perhaps we would really discover what it means that Jesus gave his body for us. (p79-80)

It is not enough for my faithful response to be about me – it needs to be about us.

I could, I do, feel despair when I read Paul, feel total unworthiness to call myself a Christian. If you feel the same, **I would suggest first** that we remember Paul was speaking out of love and was trying to offer encouragement even though we don't always hear it that way. **Secondly**, I would say that we should remember that life is not a race where only the winner is rewarded with a place in God's kingdom; it's a team sport and the goal is to get everyone over the finish line – our training squad is those of us who are part of the church but we need to carry with us everyone else who lives.

Paul knew that, and that's why he's tough with us. He still scares me but perhaps that's a good thing!