

THERFIELD CHAPEL

Sunday 20th February 2005 6:30pm

2Cor 11 vv 1-15

I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness; but you are already doing that. [2] I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. [3] But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. [4] For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. [5] But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles." [6] I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way.

[7] Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? [8] I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. [9] And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so. [10] As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine. [11] Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! [12] And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about.

[13] For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. [14] And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. [15] It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

I have it on good authority that many of you are fans of the 1970's pop group Abba! I happen to know that one of your number even organised a trip to see an Abba tribute band sometime last year. I've even heard rumours that if you walk past an Elders' Meeting, you can often hear the chorus of "Dancing Queen" coming out of the room! Well, maybe not - the thought of Uncle Paul in a long blond wig doesn't bear thinking about.

A very successful band, were Abba. There was something about their music that just hit the right spot and they were extremely popular with both young and old alike. No-one knew why. Somebody at Cambridge University even did a PhD. analysing their music to try and discover just exactly what it was that made you want to get up and dance to Abba's music.

They first became prominent in 1974 when they won the Eurovision Song Contest with a song called?..... Waterloo. (Therfield: nil points!) For a while, they were Sweden's biggest export earner - even beating the turnover of Volvo Cars!. They had nine No1 hits in the UK and ten best-selling albums. Then in 1982, they put the band to rest following the break-up of some of the relationships of the members. Since then, there have been many Abba look-alikes on the scene: Bjorn Again, Mama Mia, Abbamania, Abbacadabra .. etc. And lots of others singers and bands have sung Abba songs since. And not just Abba, of course: almost every time you hear a good song on Radio 2, you can bet that someone else has sung it before.

And why not? They say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery - and if a song was a good one, then why not re-record it? And there's obviously money to be made when a modern band re-releases a golden oldie, brought up to date and re-interpreted for a modern audience. But they're never quite the same as the original are they - sometimes they are worse, sometimes better - but never the same.

Abba wasn't around in St Paul's time. In fact in the Greek world of 2000 years ago, they simply didn't have the music celebrities that we have today. The big crowd-pullers of the time were not singers, but speakers - orators, story tellers, teachers, poets. A good speaker in those days was worshipped as much as the pop bands and singers of today.

Augustus, the Roman Emperor, employed an orator to entertain his guests - and the orator was paid the equivalent of a million pounds per year in today's terms!

And I can well imagine that, as well as speaking original material of their own, these orators would do versions of speeches and stories that they had heard other orators do ... in just the same way that modern singers re-release the old Abba songs. They may change a few or names here and there; maybe bring the story up to date; maybe add something extra to the delivery too. But they'd never be quite the same as the original.

With songs and stories, it doesn't really matter if some of the newer versions are a bit different from the original. But the gospel is another issue.

So we have set the scene for tonight's passage from scripture. It seems that some orators had heard Paul preaching and had seen the crowds that listened to him. And Paul wasn't charging a single penny to be heard! What foolishness! Surely there was money to be made here! So they listened to Paul's story of the life, death and resurrection of this man called Jesus - fantastic! What an amazing story! Then Paul makes it even more personal by telling of his own encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. What an incredible story! But what a poor story-teller Paul was! Great song: shame about the singer!

So the orators took Paul's story, changed a few things to make it a bit more appealing, put themselves in Paul's place as the ones who had met with the risen Jesus .. and then used their oratory skills to deliver the story in a much more powerful and dramatic way than ever the stuttering Paul ever could.

And they were an immediate crowd puller! Even the Corinthian Christians were taken in. The story was virtually the same as the one Paul was giving, but it was delivered with so much more style and drama, that it seemed to be the "real" version compared to Paul's version. These orators loved the attention - especially where they became the ones meeting this resurrected man-god on the road to Damascus. They, surely, were the ones who had a special revelation from God. They, surely, were witnesses of the resurrection. They, surely, were not only apostles as was St Paul - but they were "super apostles" - superior to Paul. And the crowds loved them. And the crowds gave them respect because they encouraged and accepted payment for their speeches - which made them look more honourable and professional than the mumbling Paul who always turned down their offer of money.

It's not entirely clear exactly who these false apostles were. They may have been Greek orators trying to cash-in on the lucrative business of entertaining. More likely, they were Jews:

Borrowing a verse from next week's passage - verse 22 - we read: *Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I.*

They believed themselves to be apostles of Christ, but it was a claim Paul rejected - verse 23: *For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ.*

We know from earlier chapters in this epistle that they even had letters of recommendation, they were keen to promote themselves as important, and identified themselves as so-called "super-apostles". These false apostles may have been sent out by those who at the Jerusalem Council had urged the circumcision of Gentiles and obedience to the Law of Moses (Acts 15:5). Ultimately they were self-serving, seeking monetary gains from the Corinthians and possibly also indulging in immoral acts - there's a hint of that later in chapter 12. Legalism and self-centeredness are two sides of the same coin, with self-indulgence the ultimate result.

So you can see why Paul's heart was broken by the time he wrote this letter. He had been upstaged - certainly. But more than that: the true gospel he preached to the Corinthians was being replaced with this more exciting cover-version, this re-release, this modernised and exaggerated version. And while the orators were filling the Corinthian equivalent of Wembley Stadium, with kilowatts of PA amplifiers, special effects and lighting there was Paul, left on the street corner with his sandwich board and loud-hailer, preaching to the kebab man and a dog. A sad, sorry little man brushed aside by the crowds as they rushed to hear the latest attraction at the auditorium.

Had it been just his own feelings that were hurt, Paul wouldn't have minded. But the precious gospel of Christ his Lord was being twisted to suit the eager ears. These men were branding themselves as "super apostles" Paul knew differently: they were false apostles. He knew that the gospel they were preaching wasn't the true gospel. It was not a gospel that could save people - only mislead them.

And so Paul has to add yet another ticking off in his letter to the Church at Corinth.

[3] But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. [4] For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. [5] But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles." [6] I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge.

This is a painful moment for Paul. He hated ever drawing attention to himself. But on this occasion, he had to. He had to tell the Corinthians fair and square that he was the true apostle - the one to whom the risen Jesus had appeared. And he had to tell them that this was his authority that the gospel he preached was the true gospel- the one that could bring people to salvation and into a relationship with God the Father through Christ. What other authority is there?

But how difficult for his readers to hear that message.

And what of us? We will flock to the big-name preachers and TV evangelists, preaching from their glass cathedrals that if only you ask God to make you a millionaire, he will!

And, embarrassed, we walk past that shabby little man with his sandwich-board in the market place on Saturday, handing out scruffy little tracts saying: repent of your sins for the end is close.

But who is telling the truth? To the Corinthians, it didn't seem to matter. Perhaps today's hype and publicity and celebrity worship is not so new after all. We'd rather listen to a pop-singer's or footballer's silly semi-religious notions of a vague "spirituality", than the gospel truth from a nobody.

And yet Paul wasn't sad for himself. He wasn't jealous of the celebrity status of these false "super-apostles". He was jealous for the truth and for the lives of the people of the church of Corinth.

[2] I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. [3] But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

Paul's over-riding desire was to see the church at Corinth filled with believers who had come into their own relationship with the Lord. And he feared that these false apostles were trying to drag the believers back into a Jewish legalism, where there is no salvation, rather than into the freedom from the law of sin and death, which is the free gift of Christ.

The second prong of argument that Paul had with the Corinthians in tonight's passage is a question of money. Specifically, money offered to Paul by the Corinthian church, which Paul refused to accept. The Corinthians interpreted this refusal as an insult. As we've already seen, the culture of time was that speakers, orators, were paid. By refusing to accept money from the Corinthians, he was effectively treating them as if they were poor charity cases, and that offended them. So we need to understand just how Paul operated financially.

I don't know how many of you tune around the bewildering array of television channels available on satellite and cable TV, but even if you don't, you're almost sure to have come across programmes produced by some huge American churches. I haven't seen a lot of them myself, but have seen documentary programmes about them.

In America, it seems, there are large churches who use regular television broadcasts as their main means of outreach to the world. Programmes like "Hour of Power" spring to mind, as do pictures of huge glass cathedrals packed with thousands of people being addressed by a very loud, animated and powerful preacher, wearing a very smart suit and expensive watch.

Their preaching is phenomenal - in a sense. They jump and shout with arms raised proclaiming Jesus as the answer to everyone's needs if only people would submit to him and accept his salvation and power. Quotations from Scripture punctuate everything they say and there is an almost constant background noise of people shouting "Praise the Lord" and "Yes, Jesus." The whole performance is obviously well-rehearsed and choreographed. The music and choir are superb, the lighting and decor is as visually stunning as an TV studio back-drop, and there has obviously been a small fortune spent on buildings, cameras, sound equipment, staff, landscaping and production.

Some of these churches have their own housing estates, swimming pools, skating rinks, bowling alleys, schools, shops, libraries and so on. The ministers live in mansions, wear designer clothes and big gold watches.

OK - they aren't all like that of course, but some are.

Where does the money come from to support this extremely expensive ministry? It comes from the members of the church but mostly from the television viewers, who donate millions of dollars a week in response to the all-to-frequent requests for cash and donations which seem to punctuate the preaching and ministry of these TV-churches.

What do we make of it all? There are lots of reactions, and mixtures of reactions - and if you're anything like me, your reaction can change minute-by minute.

On the one hand, I can feel myself experiencing a certain amount of jealousy and envy. Wouldn't it be fantastic to be part of something so powerful and big and successful?

But, on the other hand, does this seem to you like St Paul's way? We've just heard that Paul refused to accept money from the Corinthians while he was with them. For Paul, this was a very important point of principle. If he was receiving money from the church with whom he was staying at the time, could it be that his position might be compromised? There's a saying we have that goes: He who pays the piper calls the tune! In other words, if the Corinthians were paying him, how easy would it be for Paul to speak from the heart and maybe have to give them a ticking-off when it was needed? What congregation would continue to pay him if he said things that could make them feel uncomfortable?

With financial independence, Paul was free to speak from the heart without any fears that his livelihood would be affected by any harsh words he might have to deliver. More than that: he could not lay himself open to any external criticism that he could be playing to the audience. So Paul's rules on financial support were quite clear.

[7] Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? [8] I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. [9] And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so.

While Paul was in Corinth, he would rely on his own wits to provide for his own support - maybe by making tents. If he needed more help, then he would reluctantly accept gifts from the Philippian church where he had preached previously. And it seems that the opposite case would also be true - he would accept gifts from the Corinthian church, but only when he was no longer with them and was ministering elsewhere. That way he could maintain his independence from the local congregation and, importantly, be SEEN to be independent from them.

It's a very moral and defensible position to take, and is not unlike the way that we support our missionaries overseas today.

Interestingly, though, it is a different stance from the accepted practice in the church. When Jesus sent the disciples out on missions he told them this:

Luke 10:4-7: Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road. [5] "When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' [6] If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. [7] Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages.

So why shouldn't Paul us this right to be supported by the local people? He certainly acknowledged that he had those rights, but he chose to waive them. We've already seen that, by refusing financial support, it gave him independence, but maybe also for Paul was the desire to be like Christ himself, who for our sakes became poor so that we might become rich.

Yet still the Corinthians regarded Paul's refusal to accept money as an insult to them. Surprising really, when Paul had already made his position quite clear back in his first letter to the Corinthians:

1 Cor. 9ff: Don't we have the right to food and drink? [5] Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas?

[7] Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? [8] Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? [9] For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? [10] Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? [15] But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast. [16] Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! [17] If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. [18] What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it.

But, not only were the Corinthians offended by Paul's refusal of money, the false apostles too made Paul's independence a charge against him. They took support all right, and they claimed that the fact that they took it was a proof that they really were apostles. No doubt they maintained that Paul refused to take anything because his teaching was not worth anything. But in their heart of hearts they were afraid that people would see through them, and they wanted to drag Paul down to their own level of greed.

Up to this point, Paul had been quite mild in his remarks about the so-called "super-apostles" but, after making his arguments, in verse 13 he turns directly on them and condemns them:

[13] For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. [14] And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. [15] It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

They were only shams, claiming to be ambassadors of Christ when in fact they were emissaries or servants of Satan. Like Satan's masquerade as an angel of light, they were masquerading as apostles and servants of righteousness. Like whitewashed tombs, they may have looked righteous, but inside there was only death and decay.

Paul's condemnation of them is very like Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees:

Matthew 23:25-28: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. [26] Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. [27] "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. [28] In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

There's a little story told by William Barclay that I'd like to end with: It's about a group of people who were having dinner together. After dinner it was agreed that each one should recite something. A well-known actor rose to his feet and, with all the resources of elocution and dramatic art, he recited the twenty-third psalm, the Lord is My Shepherd and, when finished, he sat down to tremendous applause. A quiet man followed him. He too began to recite the twenty-third psalm and at first the other people began to snigger at his clumsy delivery. But before he had ended there was a stillness that was more eloquent than any applause. When he had spoken the last words there was silence, and then the actor leant across and humbly said to him, "Sir, I know the psalm, but you know the shepherd."

By God's grace and love, Therfield, may we all know the psalm and the Shepherd. Amen.

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