Free of Charge

*A Sermon on 2 Corinthians 11:1-15*

Last week at St George’s we began the final stretch of our journey through 2 Corinthians, as we started in on chapters 10-13. I said last week that these chapters are marked by Paul’s much bleaker, more pessimistic assessment of the situation in Corinth, and speculated that Paul, having written the first nine chapters of 2 Corinthians, may have received some additional news from Corinth, perhaps in the form of an oral report from a Christian passing through Corinth on his way to Macedonia, where Paul was based.

The report rattles the Apostle: the false teachers already known to Paul have now increased their hold over the young church in Corinth and the congregation itself seems poised to terminate their relationship with Paul altogether. Worried that the Corinthians are about to reject, not only him, but the message he’d brought as well, Paul is stung into defending himself, an activity he regards as boasting.

Today’s passage falls neatly into three paragraphs, each of which we’ll focus on in turn in the three parts of this sermon. In the first paragraph, Paul describes his own agitation as a state of ‘godly jealousy’, inviting the Corinthians to view their fractured relationship with him through *his* eyes. In the second paragraph, Paul revisits an earlier cause of friction between himself and the Corinthians, namely, his refusal to allow the Corinthians to support him financially while he was living and working in their city. And in the third paragraph, Paul focuses his attention on the rival missionaries who have been aggravating an already tense situation by further alienating the affections of the Corinthians Christians away from Paul, their founding apostle. And this paragraph, containing Paul’s sharpest denunciation of the false apostles so far, is dominated by the problem of deception. Let’s dive in!—

Part One

*Godly Jealousy*

Read with me from v. 1 of chapter 11:—

I hope you will put up with me in a little foolishness. Yes, please put up with me! 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.

Paul begins by craving the Corinthians’ indulgence as he launches into what is sometimes called ‘The Fool’s Speech’. By characterising what he’s about to say as ‘foolishness’, Paul indicates his reluctance to engage in any form of self-defence, or boasting, and he also alerts us to the fact that his tone throughout the next two chapters will often be highly ironic.

He then justifies the boasting he’s about to engage in by comparing himself to a father who has betrothed his daughter to someone, only to discover at the eleventh hour that his daughter has, unbeknownst to him, been enjoying the attention of another man. He then alludes to Genesis 3, by comparing the Corinthians to Eve:

But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived – the Greek could just as easily be translated ‘seduced’ – by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

The use of sexual imagery and metaphors taken from the sphere of marriage is meant to open the Corinthians up to the intensity of Paul’s alarm and sense of betrayal at realising that the Corinthians’ allegiance to the Jesus he had preached is in danger of being jettisoned in favour of another Jesus and another gospel which they find more congenial – that preached by the rival missionaries. And we see this in Paul’s ironic recycling of the language of ‘putting up with’ in v. 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 Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.

Paul is returning to the idea of exclusivity that he raised back in chapter six. There he framed the issue by using the lens of the covenant, or treaty, which God had made with his Old Testament people, Israel, a covenant which had bound the Israelites to worship him exclusively of all other ‘gods’. This time Paul uses the idea of the marriage vow to make much the same point. What is different in chapter 11, however, is that Paul draws attention to his own role as founding apostle by referring to himself imaginatively as father to a young woman whom he has promised in marriage to another. He feels hurt and embarrassed, presumably; he also feels jealous.

Jealousy is a particularly difficult emotion to experience, because it takes all the intensity of an earlier pleasurable emotion – say, the soaring melody of first love – then plays it back in a minor key. Jealousy is also problematic because it often occurs alongside unfounded suspicions that arise out of one spouse’s insecurity and that can then strangle a marriage, which is why, I suspect, Paul hastens to characterise his jealousy as ‘godly’. In other words, Paul is hurt and bewildered to discover that perhaps the Corinthians’ love for the Jesus he had preached to them was only superficial, and could be easily channelled into other areas of interest.

Paul, then, is like a youth group leader, or Sunday school teacher, who isn’t satisfied when she hears the right answers being parroted back at her, or with her own ability to create a safe and enjoyable space for teenagers to meet in week by week. What she wants for her kids is, instead, a sustained, deep, personal commitment to Jesus that will be able to survive, say, a disappointing church experience in early adulthood, or the falling away of a respected mentor, or a difficult break-up, or the merciless slog of a medical internship. She’s looking for the sort of commitment that will outlive the kinds of disappointments and trials that crop up inevitably in even the most placid and unruffled of Christian lives. She wants each child in her care to develop a relationship with Jesus that will endure, and she experiences a godly jealousy whenever it seems that such perseverance might not be forthcoming. She’s careful not to be manipulative of her kids, or anxiously controlling, whenever they face a fork in the road of their Christian walk, but though she may take care not to show it too much when catching up with them, she still cares about them and their life with God tremendously, even years after they’ve left the youth group and are living their own lives as adults. That’s the kind of heart that Paul has for the Corinthians, and the kind of passion he is modelling for anyone involved in growing others in their Christian faith.

Part Two

*Free of Charge*

Paul begins the second paragraph of today’s reading by returning once more to the invidious comparisons which the Corinthians have been drawing between him and the rival missionaries now established in Corinth. Read with me from v. 5:—

I do not think I am in the least inferior to those ‘super-apostles’ (note well those ironic inverted commas). I may indeed be untrained as a speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this clear to you in every way.

Paul’s lack of rhetorical polish has already been flagged as an area where fails to compete with the rival missionaries back in the previous chapter. He angrily reasserts that while the *form* of his speaking may leave something to be desired, there’s nothing wrong with its *content*. He then moves on to another area in which he has managed to disappoint the Corinthians: his failure to allow them to support him financially while living and working in their midst. Read with me from v. 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? I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. 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.

Paul here refers to his first stay in Corinth, which we can read about in chapter 18 of the Book of Acts. When he first arrived in Corinth Paul supported himself by working as a tentmaker, preaching the good news about Jesus in the Synagogue on the Sabbath. Paul’s manual work as a tentmaker allowed him not to rely on the Corinthians themselves to provide for him, and enabled him, as v. 7 of our passage says, to ‘preach the gospel of God to them free of charge’. When Paul’s co-workers, Silas and Timothy, arrived in Corinth, they brought with them funds raised among the freshly-planted congregations of Macedonia which enabled Paul to stop tentmaking and devote all his time to teaching, and this is what Paul means by his reference to ‘robbing other churches so as to serve you’ in v. 8.

With a few exceptions, this would seem to have been the normal pattern of how Paul funded his mission: A sending church would pay for Paul’s travel expenses and perhaps for the cost of establishing himself in a new town; Paul would supplement this if necessary by working in his trade; the newly planted congregation would in turn fund Paul’s travel to another town where the cycle would begin again. Paul was aware, however, that not all missionaries followed the same procedure, and he defends the right of missionaries to receive food and board from the communities with whom they work back in his first letter to the Corinthians, where he also shows that he is aware of Jesus’ teaching on this question, which has been preserved for us in chapter 10 of Luke’s Gospel, read out to us earlier this morning. In other words, there was more than one way open to first-century missionaries to fund their work!

Interestingly, you can see a similar difference of approach on this question by comparing the funding models of church planters and university staff workers today. Generally speaking, while church planters may start with some financial backing from outside sources, they generally plan for the churches they plant to support them fully within two or three years. University student workers, on the other hand, are typically funded by a network of friends and church family who share the student worker’s commitment to evangelising and discipling Christian university students. There’s no expectation that uni students financially support their staff worker while at uni, but they may well be encouraged to give once they’ve graduated and are earning a salary.

So, why have the Corinthians been upset by Paul’s decision to opt for the second strategy in preference to the first? This is where it becomes necessary to speculate a little! In the first place, Paul himself seems to have opted for strategy no. 1 when in Philippi, basing himself in the house of the businesswoman Lydia at least from the time of her conversion, which you can read about in Acts 16. The Corinthians may have become aware of this, and feel that this is a mark of Paul’s special affection for the Philippians and feel hurt at being treated differently by the apostle when he worked in *their* city.

In the second place, there may have been cultural issues peculiar to Corinth that made Paul more than usually hesitant to base himself in a convert’s house and to accept their patronage. On the one hand, we know from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians that the congregation seemed prone to factionalism. In choosing to stay with one convert, Paul may have reasoned, he would only be feeding the beast: whoever Paul chose to stay with would have been able to make a bid for authority in the community on that basis and Paul didn’t want to get dragged into power plays of that kind if he could possibly help it.

On the other hand, it was the almost universal practice of itinerant teachers of all stripes – philosophers and rhetoricians as well as religious figures – to accept hospitality from their students in the Corinth of Paul’s day, and so by refusing their hospitality and patronage, Paul may have been trying to avoid having Christianity being thought of as just one more option on the intellectual and religious smorgasbord of the Early Empire.

Or maybe – continuing to speculate here, of course – Paul wanted to emphasise the wonderful reality, the good news, that the treasure of salvation comes to us freely: we can’t do anything to earn it, no matter how impressive our lives may seem on the outside. Equally, God offers salvation to everyone, rich and poor alike. Salvation is of inestimable worth, and in any case, it can only be given, not earned. What better way was there for Paul to make this point than by delivering it to the status-conscious and fiercely competitive Corinthians ‘free of charge’?

But in any case, by the time Paul came to write this letter, he had acquired an additional reason to continue to refuse the financial assistance of the Corinthians. Read with me from v. 12. Paul writes:—

And I will keep on doing what I am doing – that is, refusing the Corinthians’ offers to support him when he is working among them – 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.

Paul’s opponents, evidently, *have* been availing themselves of the Corinthians’ hospitality, and in order to distinguish himself as sharply as possible from what he regards as the super-apostles’ parasitism he renews his commitment to ‘keep himself from being a burden to them in any way,’ as he put in v. 9. And with this shift back to the activity of the super-apostles, Paul begins on the final paragraph of today’s reading.

Part Three

*Masks*

Now, let me begin by clarifying what kind of masks I’m going to be referring to in this section!...

…So, with that disclaimer, read with me now from v. 13:—

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

Paul denounces the rival missionaries in the strongest of terms. First, he apparently invents a new word to describe them: ψευδοαπόστολοι, or false apostles, presumably influenced by the Old Testament’s ‘false prophets’, or ψευδοπροφήται. Then, three times in quick succession he uses the verb ‘to masquerade’. The false apostles *masquerade* as apostles of Christ; Satan *masquerades* as an angel of light, and his servants – the rival missionaries, that is – *masquerade* as servants of righteousness. The Greek word underlying doesn’t actually mean to put on a mask, but it does it means to disguise oneself as something one is not in order to deceive, to change your outward appearance so as convince others more readily to put their trust in you.

Now, all of us from time to time become conscious of a disconnect between what we display on the outside and what’s really going on for us on the inside. You find yourself sternly telling your three-year-old that no, she can’t wear her undies on her head to preschool; you calmly ask your sixteen-year-old son to change gears after he throws the car into reverse on the Southern Outlet; you quietly tell your boss you’ll get the report done that afternoon, knowing full well that you’ll actually be doing it well into the night. Often that disconnect is simply part and parcel of keeping yourself together long enough not to be floored by the silliness or the danger or the injustice of the situation you’re facing. But we all need times when the inner and outer can come together, when we take off our masks and put aside our fancy dress. And these moments are all the more important for Christians. Because Christians, particularly once they’ve been Christian for a while, become acutely aware of the gap that exists between how they are now and how God would have them be. Wanting to become something you’re not, or not yet, or wanting to live for God when living for yourself is all you’ve ever had to do up till now, intensifies that disconnect between the outer you who’s presenting the Christian version or yourself to everyone around you and the inner you who’s perfectly aware that so much of your desires and patterns of thinking remains unchanged. In the Christian walk, the place where we bring both aspects of ourselves together, the old and the new, the inner and the outer, is confession. We do this formally every week, of course, but we also do it every time we’re honest about that gap with others. There’s a time and place for fancy dress, for living ‘as if’ our inner person has already caught up with the person God is making us to be, but it’s helpful for us to remember as we do that we’re wearing fancy dress, lest it start feeling like we’re wearing a straightjacket. There have to be times when we take off our masks.

Equally, it’s right to be suspicious of a mask that never slips! Christian leaders who always say the right thing at the right time, who are always the hero of every sermon illustration they give, who can always so helpfully identify just where other leaders have gone wrong regardless of whether anyone has asked their opinion or not are at risk of exchanging their fancy dress for a straightjacket, their mask for a bad facelift. Good leadership begins with the acknowledgement that any righteousness you possess is still very much a work in progress.

Let’s pray.

Heavenly Father,

We pray for kids’ church leaders and Bible study leaders at St George’s. Help them to have a godly jealousy for the people they serve: not to be satisfied with their right answers but to yearn for their wholehearted, lifelong obedience to Jesus. We thank you that the good news of salvation through Jesus’ death comes to us free of charge. And we pray that in your kindness you would give us the courage to take off our masks, and the wisdom to know when and with whom to do so. Help those of us who are leaders, especially, to be honest with others about our failings, and in doing so rest in the strength with which you work so powerfully in our weakness.

We pray this in Jesus’ name,

Amen.