**1 Corinthians Notes Week 5**

Hello,

Welcome to the first of 3 weeks when I am not doing the preaching so I am not sure what will be said on Sundays, so the notes will just work from the text.

I also know that for many of us the world has shown us this week that there are issues we have either not understood fully or not tackled seriously– we are looking anew at our unconscious bias and searching for how we do better. Its not easy, its sometimes painful.

But there are little things we can do to build a better future.

As Maya Angelou has expressed it “Once we know better, we do better.”

We don’t want to return to ‘normal’.

So I wanted to think about how we could build new practices even into how we read the bible together. What I’m hearing a lot from my black colleagues is that we need to find ways to build the fight for equality into our learning and our story telling.

**THIS WEEK**

I am going to give some text focussed discussion below, and some exegetical notes so you can learn about Paul’s context, and some more general discussion pointers; but I thought it might to be good to provide some ways that we can shake up our thinking whenever we read the Bible – ways that might help us move out of our own understanding to think about others, and to “de-centre” our own experience when we read.

I talked a lot last year about the bias we bring to the bible when we read it. The simplest of these biases is that we ‘just read’ the bible without any other influence.

We read in our context, and it was written in another one.

We often don’t stop to explain our context to ourselves, let alone those around us, so we assume that everyone else is thinking it means the same thing.

In chapter 7 of Corinthians we are going to encounter some verses about slavery – and they are embarrassing – it will become clear then that reading 1 Corinthians in a predominantly white, 21st century British context is very different to hearing those verses if your family were enslaved people only 3 generations ago.

In chapter 8-11 we will hear a lot about the rich and poor – those passages will speak differently depending on whether you are rich or poor, and might sound challenging to one group while sounding encouraging to the other.

Here are some questions then, that I have thought about, please add your own or tell me other ways you have been trying to learn:

* **What in our cultural/church culture background influences our reading of this passage?**
  + Has it always been used in a particular type of service for example?
  + This means asking what your cultural or theological background is.
  + This might be a good discussion to have in a bible study group anyway – get to know where each other is actually coming from/what your starting assumptions are about the bible or these stories.
* **how might you read this passage differently if you weren’t from your particular cultural/theological back ground**? is a good question to ask.
  + What elements in the passage could be understood in multiple ways?
  + What assumptions have you made about key elements?

Its not perfect but it’s a beginning to trying to centre other peoples stories, other cultures experience of the Bible.

It won’t always be relevant to particular passages (you might be focussing on the Greco-roman context for example) but, like with feminist scholarship where we say don’t wait for there to be a week on women or a woman in the room to consider that women read, use and are in the Bible – we need to start doing a similar practice with issues of race. And in wider sense so are issues of class and sexuality. Where any group has been seen as ‘not the norm’, they probably have been taught to read the bible in only one way – I suggest we might get a better understanding if we tried to deliberately think of them when we read.

It will be disjointed at first, but it will become second nature soon, and might create a more open understanding of the bible and of our community.

Its small but I wanted to offer something.

**TEXT FOCUSSED QUESTIONS:**

**Thinking of metaphors and imagery.**

This week I wanted to build on the sort of discussion last week and focus on highlighting metaphors and imagery within a passage.

This is another easy way into a passage. It can go in depth if the leader has time to research but it also can gain fruitful discussion simply by focussing on this element.

*Metaphors and imagery*

*Metaphors are key to language and expression. We would be lost without them. “I’m feeling blue today” “we are the body of Christ”.*

*Many ideas would be impossible to convey without metaphorical elements – for example we say ‘! feel low today’ or tell people to ‘cheer up’, we know that moods don’t actually go up and down physically, but because we understand the image we can transfer that on to the idea of a mood and understand what is happening. We do this without thinking. We do it so much and so often that we sometimes feel that linguists (or preachers) really are going too far when they pull them out.*

*BUT examining the metaphor or the imagery a writer uses and examining what* we *understand by that imagery can be really useful in working out why we think the text means what we think it means.*

*AND because what an image means can get lost over time or change it is a really good way of noticing whether we are in sync with the original context.*

*An example of metaphors changing over time is this: In chapter 5 Paul uses a metaphor that ‘a little yeast raises the whole dough’ to express quickly that one bad thing can change the entire community. In commentaries from the 80s/90’s people go into a lot of explanation about yeast – because they assume that most readers don’t bake their own bread. If you don’t understand what yeast is or how it works that image is entirely lost on you. The whole sentence needs explaining. But in lock down, when the world is baking crazy I probably don’t need to explain it at all. In fact I can leave it as ‘your boasting about sin is dreadful, don’t you know a little yeast raises the whole dough’, and you will understand what he means, and how it applies to people.*

*The thing is for any metaphor or any imagery to work we all have to be thinking of the same two things – we all have to understand the image, and we all have to understand what it is being applied to. (similar to why some jokes only work with some people – if you don’t get the context then you don’t get the joke).*

*The problem with an ancient text is that sometimes an image that seems straightforward might look very different to us than Paul.*

*So in this type of study we are going to focus on the images (some are metaphors, some similes, some just imagery) that Paul uses in his speech to get his point across, and think about whether what we imagine he is saying is actually what he means.*

**Activity**

Chapter 4 of 1 Corinthians has three major sections full of different metaphors and images that can be discussed, so this is a good way into a long passage rather than spending a long time on each verse individually.

I would suggest splitting the group if you can for the first question into 3 groups :Verses 1-5, 6- 13 and 14-21.

ASK THESE QUESTIONS:

* What metaphors can you identify in the passage? OR what images is Paul using to make his point?
  + Write these down somewhere
* Without worrying about the biblical context, but thinking about your own experience, what feelings do these images conjure up? What do you think of when you think of ‘x’ image?
* Go back to the passage –

  + Does hearing other peoples understanding of that image help you think about the passage?
  + do you think the writer is using those images in the same way?
  + If not, what do you think the writer wants you to think by using such imagery?

*NOTES ON LEADING THIS DISCUSSION*:

*When you go through a passage beforehand, even if you haven’t a lot of time, do think about what metaphors or imagery might be challenging or upsetting for people in your group, as you will be asking them to share feelings or experience.*

*This passage contains the metaphor of fatherhood, and of teachers. Be aware that though Paul considers fatherhood a perfect analogy for caring authority that is not everyone’s experience. This is an excellent conversation to have and fits well with the activity but it is important to realise some people may be more affected by this, or not want to share their feelings about the metaphor.*

*It also has the phrase ‘scum of the earth’, and Paul uses homelessness as an image of degradation. Again, we need to have the discussion about how we view homelessness differently, or what Paul means by using that image, but its key to make sure that people feel safe and not degraded by* our *conversation.*

*We can embrace the text and its limitations without making those in the room think that that is how we now view those issues.*

*Leading bible studies doesn’t always take a lot of preparation of knowledge – the text itself can be enough - but it does take a bit of pastoral preparation just to think about your group and how to handle what may be painful or awkward. You may be able to give people other ways to engage – to search the internet for modern versions of the image or to draw the image or find music that they are reminded of (obviously depending on what it is)*

GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

**Exegetical Notes on Chapter 4**

**V1-5**

Paul is building on the metaphors of being God’s building in chapter 4, and here he makes the building the household.

He appeals to the servant model of apostleship – building again on those ideas of apostles being ‘merely’ the active agents in a bigger work that God is doing.

Paul has got himself in a bit of a pickle in chapter 4. He needs to maintain what he has said about how the leaders aren’t as important as God, and not to take pride in their human wisdom, while also reasserting his own authority within the community so that he can tell them how to live. Its difficult.

So he uses a particular image of a servant – the ‘oikonomos’ -the house steward “We are house stewards of the mysteries of God”.

We translate this term in a few ways: ‘steward’, ‘servant’, ‘care-taker’.

The word itself is actually a very specific role within a Greco-Roman household – the oikonomos has specific responsibilities for managing staff, food, running the household day to day. Though a servant they are at the top of the household hierarchy.

So, though Paul seems to be lowering himself and saying he is *merely* a servant, he is actually maintaining his authority. If the community are the building of God, then Paul is the one who manages them. It’s a very clever metaphor to use.

Furthermore, they are trusted servants. The use of the word oikonomos invokes this knowledge as they are trusted with money and management. So Paul is making a claim to God having already found him trustworthy.

In v3-5 it seems that Paul is talking here in defence of himself. It may be that there have been people within or from outside the community who have questioned his position. It’s a hyperbolic set of statements and it seems very out of place in the general discussion.

Paul does this sometimes. I feel when I’m reading him that he is reacting to something someone has said that has clearly annoyed him. Though the eschatological language (language about the end times) has a small echo of chapter 3 with its things being burned in the fire, this really does feel like a small tangent of self-defence. ‘I have been judged by God worth to be a steward and I don’t care what anyone else says’ – it certainly sounds more defensive than constructive.

We do know that the Corinthians have been listening to other teachers, so it may be that he has heard something specific. What he is setting up here is a status – that of oikonomos – that reinforces his position over any mere teacher that they know.

**V6 -13**

Paul enters into a round of sarcasm and irony. Full of back handed compliments and joking at their expense, which in verse 14 he says he didn’t say to shame them, but its really quite harsh.

He will compare his real life ‘shame’ with their perceived high status.

He is frustrated and we see that come out once again in the hyperbole but also in the extreme imagery that he uses.

His first criticism is in verse 6 where he says that they are ‘puffed up’ one against the other.

I like the imagery of being ‘puffed up’ because in chapter 5 he will use the image of yeast raising dough and how only a little makes the whole batch rise – this metaphor is also in the context of boasting so ‘puffed up’ is just a lovely image to use.

He is upset about boasting because of the same issues we learned about in chapters 1-3: nothing they have has come to them from their own efforts, they have it all from God.

So he scolds them for acting as though the things they have from God they somehow have through their own endeavours.

In verses 8-13 he barrages them with sarcasm and exclamations, which hide a challenge “if you have all you want, if you are kings already, then do you not need us or Christ?”

He is trying to turn them back to understanding that they need Christ. He ended the paragraph at chapter three with a statements that “all things are yours, but you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s”: he is trying to pull them back into not revelling so much in their spiritual gifts or spiritual state that they forget the place of God within it.

He uses his own position to make them ashamed of their claims to special status without God. The apostles, he states, look like the most despised things in the world. If this is the case, and they are the stewards of God, then your high status really means nothing.

Remember that it is they who have been taking pride in their leaders. So Paul here uses the worldly status of the leaders to show them that worldly respect means nothing. If you respect apostles you cant put your pride in your worldly knowledge or status, because they have none of that.

It’s a very good argument against types of prosperity gospel. Paul directly shows that God doesn’t use typical worldly displays of strength or respect to show who is the most important.

You really must read this whole section with a slight mocking tone, for that is what it is meant to be, until verse 11 when he starts to get serious about the state of the apostles lives.

The metaphor he uses is ‘We have become the offscourings of the world’ or scum of the earth as Craig rightly has it.

The image is one that is quite shocking to an ancient audience because it is really quite gross. The term references the skin that you scrape of when you exfoliate (in the ancient world using oil and a strigil to scrape off dead skin). Its grim. Its not scum as in rebels. Its scum as in the stuff that floats on the top of the water.

With translation I often feel that metaphors and jokes would be better served if we changed them. Scum of the earth isn’t a shocking phrase to us any more, or at least it doesn’t bring up the same revulsion that Paul is trying to elicit here.

Hes trying to say that they are the left behind, refuse, reviled things that we don’t want to think about – utterly rejected by the world vs their trying for acceptance.

Maybe we should translate it ‘we are the fat-burg of the world’. That seems like a similarly disgusting image.

**V14 -21**

Here Paul builds again on the image of household.

He has established that the Corinthians are family, now he calls them children – *his* children. Because he says, though they have had many teachers (the word here is more like guardians who took children to school -pedagogos) only one person has been their father – him.

His founding of the community gives him special authority. Within a roman household the father was the pater familias to everyone who lived there, including servants and slaves. Paul here sets himself up as the ultimate point of reference.

Paul is utterly confident that he knows best for them, and through his various metaphors he has moved them from seeing him as one leader among many sent by god, through a level of a household manager when God is around (trusted to enact God’s will), all the way to their father in the gospel (the one who sowed the seed from which they grew)!.

Its been subtle, but the language he uses has pulled them along with him so that when he reaches this statement they are longing for direction and he can offer them the edict – imitate me!

Note that he uses language of family and the language of appeal. He pleads with them. Having mocked them he moves into gentle language of family and request rather than ordering them.

He wants them to think that he loves them like a father, that those other teachers do not have the same commitment to them that he has because he is in a kinship relationship with them. This kinship bond is key to his rhetoric. The moment they do they enter into a father-child relationship with him which in 1st century Roman custom means obedience and loyalty to a degree that we really do not follow any more. In acknowledging both his father-child relationship to them and their sibling-ship with one another they construct a new family who are owed specific respect and duty. This then is no mere throw away statement but rather a statement of status and relationship that allows Paul the right to direct and scold them as they go forward.

Verse 21 is the culmination of this relationship and the lead in to chapter 5 where he tells them off – they have a choice, they can acknowledge his status and he will come with love in a spirit of gentleness, or he could come back with a stick. How they now feel about him governs what you think of his pronouncements from now on – are they the actions of a loving father trying to protect his children or a bullish leader trying to assert authority?

Its Paul…..so maybe its both…..