

The Fourth Sunday before Lent , 9 February 2025

Readings: Isaiah 6.1-8 [9-13], Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15.1-11; Luke 5.1-11

AI Summary: The sermon focuses on St. Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians 15. It emphasizes the importance of Christ's death, resurrection, and the transformative power of God's grace in our lives.

The sermon reflects on the unity of the Church, contrasting this with the divisions in the Corinthian community, and urges believers to remember that the spiritual gifts are given for the common good, not for personal gain. Love should be the guiding principle in all things, as Paul taught.

The message then shifts to Paul's reflection on the resurrection of Christ and his own experience of grace. He explains how Christ's death and resurrection are of "first importance" for the Christian faith, standing at the heart of salvation. The sermon also explores Paul's description of himself as "untimely born," explaining that even though Paul was not part of the original witnesses of Christ, he experienced a powerful conversion and encounter with the risen Christ, reinforcing the notion that God's grace is available to all, regardless of time or circumstances.

Finally, the sermon encourages reflection on how God's grace has shaped our own lives, asking if we can trace His work in us as Paul could. The overarching message is that we are a "resurrection people," living in the joy and victory of Christ's resurrection, and that God's grace has the power to transform and guide us in our journey of faith.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.** (Psalm 19.14)

Last month we focused on the readings from St Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, of which he is regarded to be the founder. The church in Corinth is a community of believers who are racked by dissension, some claiming to follow Peter, others Paul, and others Apollos. There is spiritual jealousy and rivalry. There is one-upmanship. There is unruly worship. There is too little regard for the weak. There is insufficient regard for what is of first importance. The members of this community seem to have forgotten that the spiritual gifts are given for the building of the body of believers in that place. Rather than know the unity that Christ prayed for, they are at odds with one another. We spoke of the precious gift of unity and the need to handle it with care like a precious piece of porcelain. Paul has written to the Corinthians about the better way, the way of love. Ending his 'ode to love', as I call it, with the admonishment to "Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy." (1 Corinthians 14.1) He is saying put love first and in doing so continue to strive for the spiritual gifts that you may prophesy. Let love be your guide, and should you be granted one of the spiritual gifts, know how to use it for the building up of the body of Christ.

How did Paul write about this?

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (1 Corinthians 12:4-11)

Last week we reminded ourselves of the universality of the Christian message, calling to mind Simeon’s wonderful utterance, “A Light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of the people Israel.” (Luke 2:32) The good news of Jesus Christ is for all. The passage quoted above from Paul’s letter that each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good is also inclusive. It is a reassuring message. Everyone who can say in their heart, “Jesus is Lord!” has been given the manifestation of the Spirit. It is for this reason Paul speaks of **varieties of service, varieties of activities, and varieties of spiritual gifts**. Not one of these is better than the other; rather, all are necessary for the common good and the building up of the body, the Body of Christ.

Today Paul writes to the Corinthians about the purpose of Christ’s death and the reality of Christ’s resurrection. There are three aspects of this familiar passage that I will focus on. The first is captured in the phrase, “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received.” The second is Paul writing about himself as “someone untimely born.” The third is, “His grace towards me has not been in vain.”

To get started, what would you want or what did you want to hand on to your children? A few amongst us are already great-grandparents. A good education? Good manners? Good social skills? Perhaps a little wealth, however meagre? A better life? For those who are single or without children, the question is also relevant: what do you want or what did you want to pass on, but possibly more complex? To whom or to what do you want to pass on? What is important to you? How would you go about passing on the things mentioned above? Would it be ordered or would it be implicit in who you are, what you do, the choices you make, the values you embrace, the interests you pursue etc.? What did you not want to pass on? What did you pass on? Did it include passing on the gift of the life of faith? What I would term ‘the heart of the matter’ as well as the ground of our being. There isn’t a decision I

make that is not somehow informed by my faith. There might be a discrepancy between what one hoped for and what one has achieved. Lots to think about!

As stated, this is an exercise. I originally wrote a little exercise but realised it is a big ask and a big task, but nevertheless helpful as we consider Paul writing, “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received,” namely the church’s witness, the apostolic witness to the purpose of Christ’s death, his sacrifice for our sins. Our sins being all those things that hinder us from living in God in the reality of the resurrection. Christ’s death and his appearing were in time. God in Christ makes himself known in a particular time, place, and people. What order of importance does Paul attach to his recounting of Christ’s death and resurrection? It is of first importance. Everything stands or falls on the interconnectedness of Christ’s death for our sins and his resurrection from the dead and his appearing

“to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time,... Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.”

You may well know that each Sunday is a Feast of the Resurrection. Sundays are never a day of fasting. They are always a celebration of the Christ’s rising from the dead. They are always a celebration of the New Creation. Sin atoned. Death conquered. We are a Resurrection people, and Praise of the Lord is our song, as Augustine (354-430), the 4th-century theologian of the Church, succinctly sums up who we are. We are an Easter people, and Alleluia is our song. It is not a song of lament. It is a song of joy.

Now on to ‘one untimely born’. How are we to understand this phrase? Paul writes that he is a Pharisee amongst Pharisees. (Philippians 3:5) He is the real thing with no ifs or buts. For this reason he can freely admit to having been once a prominent persecutor of the first Christians. The first Christians were those who confessed Jesus as the Messiah and him crucified and risen. When Paul writes of himself as ‘one untimely born’ he is making it clear that his experience of Christ is out of time, while he is in time. It moves him from being a persecutor of the church to a believer, a witness. In his letters, Paul refers to his life-changing

conversion three times. In the Acts of the Apostles, there are two full accounts of the Road to Damascus experience, [which Brueghel the Elder painted at least two versions of. Both hang in the KHM.] It is through his Damascus experience and his conversion that Paul subsequently becomes - and here again we glimpse the "untimely" as he calls it - a fellow apostle and an apostolic witness. Paul Schütz, a German theologian I read, writes of Paul as I recall: "We are no further in time from Paul's resurrection experience than Paul himself." Meaning we are always as close to the possibility of Christ drawing nigh as Paul was. Can we cross over? Christ come!

Christ today can make himself known to us as he made himself known to Paul long ago. Pray for those you love. This is how close we are at all times to the resurrection, or have a look at the two figures on the front cover of today's notices. Christ and Paul almost touching each other as Paul pursues love because underlying all of creation is the reality of Christ's resurrection. The sign above all signs. This allows Paul to write, hoping for a better reality, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves,..." (Romans 8:22-33)

Finally, Paul writes with his hand on his heart as it were, "His grace towards me has not been in vain". Often I have spoken from this place of God's abundant provision, the lavishing of the Holy Spirit, God's grace active in our lives. Like Paul, I too, like many of us, can speak of a closeness to God, a moment of illumination, a quiet encounter with the living God, a dramatic conversion experience, an abiding presence...

The question Paul asks of us today is: Has our life of grace been in vain? Our stories are not complete this side of eternity, until we inhale and exhale our final breath. In some cases, many chapters have been written. Depending on our age and health, there may only be a few still to be written or we may have only just begun. At the end, will we be able to trace the life of the Holy Spirit, the provision of divine grace working within our stories? With Paul can we say or will we come to say that God's grace was not given in vain? Even today, long after his passing, the Apostle is providing preaching, guidance, and wisdom to the Church.

May our legacies as much as they were full of grace endure. God willing! Deo volente! May our lives be dedicated to the Glory of God like this stained glass window as those untimely born having known what is of first importance. **Amen.**