

We're going through Paul's letter to the Corinthians, and tonight we come to Chapter 4 which explores the relationship between the church and its leaders.

What was happening in Corinth was that some people were saying
"Well Paul brought me to Jesus so he's the man!",
and others were saying
"no way - Peter is the founder of the church so he rocks!",
and still others were saying
"Its Apollos for me, his sermons are amazing and he makes great Spaghetti!"
factions were developing,
people were getting shot (*well maybe that's an exaggeration*)
But the whole thing was beginning to kick off

Some people thought Paul was great –
and other people though he was rubbish
Some people though Apollos could "do no wrong"
and others thought he sucked.
The whole thing was getting completely out of control!

So Paul is writing to them saying "
enough - you're acting like children!
this has to stop!"
"everyone go sit on the naughty step".

In 1 Corinthians Chapter 4 he says, look...
We Apostles are neither as wonderful as you think we are; and
we're not as bad as you accuse us of either.

In verses v1-8, he says
we (your leaders) are not as wonderful as you think we are (*so take down your fridge magnets of David Garratt, remove your Tee Shirts of Jeremy Bamber*) we're not as wonderful as you think we are – and actually neither are you;
and then in n verses 9-17, he says
we're not as bad as people may accuse us of either! – and you'd do well to copy us!

Every church has the potential to "put its leaders on a pedestal" and to "throw tomatoes at them".

It rips churches apart, it destroys people's faith, and kills the gospel.

So tonight I want to say two things:
we (the leadership) are not as wonderful as you may think we are (no surprises there then!), but then neither are you 😊; and
we're not as bad as some may accuse us of – and you would do well to copy us!

So firstly,

1. We are not as wonderful as you think we are!

1.1 and therefore we should never seek to be honoured among you...

In v1 Paul says "So then, you ought to regard us as servants of Christ"

The word 'servant' here literally means "under rower"

The "rowers" were the slaves who rowed Greek ships

The "under rowers" were the slaves who were placed on the lowest tier, in the depths in the plumbing, with no access to light and fresh air.

They were the lowest galley slaves, they were 'the low life's, 'the lowest of the low',

And this is how Paul says you should regard your leaders.

Paul says "don't think of me or Apollos or Peter as 'celebrities' think of us as galley slaves – the low-life's in the church ☺

Being a Christian leader should carry with it no status, or celebrity, or rank or privilege.

You see the problem is that

Whenever you put power and religious positions together –you get **poison**

Whenever religion and celebrity come together it is not long before **corruption** follows

All the atrocities of religion revolve around the misuse of power by its leadership

From the selling of indulgences so that get you days off purgatory

to Paedophile Priests –

its all about the corruption of power.

Do not exalt us – it will corrupt us!

Therefore no one should want to be a leader in the church for the kudos

After all - No one picks up the Sussex Express and looks for a job in the "Slave" section

No one says "look, here's the job of my dreams – it's a galley slave!"

No one comes home after school saying "It sucks, we had a Career Day, and there wasn't a stall advertising how to become a slave!"

Nobody aspires to be a slave!

Leaders are to be like galley slaves –

we should give up all trappings of power and status

Bishops should not live in Palaces,

Clergy should not wear fancy robes,

We should not love pomp and ceremony.

In fact, we should **everything we can** to discourage people in thinking that our role is exalted, high-ranking or prestigious in any way.

We are to be galley slaves.

Because our purpose is to serve, to be real, to connect with the world...

That how Jesus did it!

he gave up his power and status

He gave up his crown of glory,

He turned his back on the adoration of angels

and became nothing

an insignificant *human child*

he had no Palace,

he didn't wear fine robes,
he didn't have a tee shirt with a big "J" on the front or a "Son of God" badge

He gave it all up that he might be real with us, connect with us and serve us...

we should not seek to be honoured

1.2 Our purpose is to be faithful to the gospel

v1 we are those entrusted with the secret things of God.

Now it is required that those who have been given such a trust must prove faithful.

v3 I care very little if I am judged by you ...; indeed, I do not even judge myself.

My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.

v5 ... he will expose the motives of men's hearts.

As leaders we have been entrusted with the secret things of God: the gospel.

v1 The gospel is secret because it is so counter-intuitive to the way our world thinks.

The gospel is God's unconditional love for us – the problem is we have been programmed to believe in only conditional love: love that depends on our performance, on being likeable, on earning it) – yet God's love is Unconditional (even to those who cannot perform, to those who are unlikable).

The gospel is of the sacrifice of God on the cross for those who don't deserve it (yet we would never do such a thing!),

The gospel is of freedom gained by giving ourselves to God (when we think freedom is gained by living for ourselves!)

At every level the gospel is counter-intuitive

And people won't naturally see it.

On Monday I was cooking some Duck.

Amanda had put the duck in the fridge but now I was ready to cook it.

When I opened the fridge I couldn't see it.

I stared at the shelves for about 15 minutes –

I knew the duck was in there but I couldn't see it.

So I started to touch each object in the fridge in turn,

I touched the lettuce 'not duck' I said to myself,

I touched the cucumber, the cheese, the milk 'not duck' I said.

I went through the entire fridge (more or less) and I couldn't see the duck.

Eventually, fuming that someone had stolen my duck and frustrated as hell!,

I went to Amanda and said "Darling, do you know where the duck is?"

She said 'second shelf on the right'.

I doubted it! I had looked there a dozen times!

But when I went back and there it was: second shelf on the right.

I couldn't see it because I was looking for a red packet –

The duck was in a black packet!

*It wasn't, that it wasn't there,
it wasn't, that it wasn't obvious –
it was just contrary to my expectations and therefore no matter how hard I looked I
couldn't see it!*

The Gospel is like this.

It is good. It makes sense. It works.
But people don't see it because it is so counter-intuitive.
They need someone to show them where to look, and
the leaders of the church are entrusted to make sure that happens.

and v2 we must be faithful in this.

Faithfulness is tipping up when you don't want to;
Faithfulness understands that it's not about applause – its about unseen hard work;
Faithfulness is staying when the going gets tough, when everybody else has gone
home and there's still a mountain of work to do;

Faithfulness is praying on a Wednesday because you know prayer is important;
Faithfulness (leaders) is about giving 10% of our income, and then some, because
we know ministry costs money.

Faithfulness is about week in week out commitment, come hell or high water, when
it's inconvenient, when it's restricting and when it's the last thing that we want to do

Yet every leader knows that Faithfulness is the way that saves souls,
builds a church that makes a difference (*and doesn't just pussy foot around shuffling
deck chairs on the Titanic*),
which transforms lives and honours the God who is ever faithful!

And Paul says in v3 “We don't do this for the applause of men”.

I don't care what people say about me, says Paul,

I'm not seeking your approval,

I am doing this for God,

he is my judge v4.

If a leader serves for the applause of the church
their motives will be flawed,
they will not have the guts to do the right thing (because the right thing is very often
unpopular), and
they will burn out because churches are usually very poor at applauding!

We leaders should not seek honour,
we are called to be faithful... and actually, says Paul

1.3 You, should be no different!

*v7 For who makes you different from anyone else? ... Already you have all you
want!*

v8 Already you have become rich! You have become kings--and that without us!

The reality is that your calling is no different to ours
like us, you are called to fill yourself in God,
to have his glory pour out of part of you.
And therefore you can never say
“I have arrived, I get it completely, I understand what the cross is all about”
because the truth is – you and I, we have barely scratched the surface!
our relationship with God is still paddling in the shallow end!

v8 says “already you have become rich, already you think you have it all!” –
Paul says “let me tell you haven’t even begun!”
There must be more than this!
And there is!
It is found in the depths of faithfulness.

Listen to this...
The experience of God’s love is always found in the depths of faithfulness.
The abundant life of God is discovered through the faithful life of his people.

Faithfulness commits to ‘God’s people’ and doesn’t say we’ll just remain on the
fringe of church – it means I’ll join, I’ll get stuck in, I’ll commit;
Faithfulness says I’ll serve week in week out for the gospel of Christ – and not for
the applause or appreciation
Faithfulness is about giving – and not being a passenger, or a consumer in church;

Faithfulness, says I’ll join you praying on a Wednesday because prayer is important;
It says I’ll give 10% of my income as a start because we know ministry costs money;
It says “we are faithful because Jesus was faithful to us”.

When people called him mad - Jesus was faithful;
When the queue of those wanting to be healed stretched out the door, down the street
and over the hill – Jesus was faithful
When his friends betrayed him, when those he came to save crucified him, when he
was covered in unfaithfulness of humanity – Jesus as faithful

He was faithful because that is the way
to save souls,
to build his church,
to transforms lives and
to honours the God who is forever faithful

Will you be that faithful?
Will you give yourself to make a difference?
Will you be a galley slave?
It is the only way to find the glory of God!

We are not as good as some think we are

2. But then we are not as bad as some would have you believe either!

2.1 Our Problem is that we are easy targets

v9 says "For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena.

We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men.

Leaders are always easy targets

They stick their head above the parapet and everyone is quite happy to take a pop shot.

If we look at the viciousness that our papers attack those in public office,

the cartoons that make fun of them,

the one-sided reporting and the deliberate misquotations

we seem to be a society that has a pathological instinct to crucify its leaders

I have a friend who used to lead worship at a different church – a lovely guy.

He took me to a football match once, and the language he used to abuse the referee

and the manager was unbelievable!

what is it about our culture that allows us to crucify our leaders without conscience!

But worse than that, is the fact that: the scales that we use to judge them are much more sensitive, much more extreme and much more judgemental than the scales we use to judge ourselves

v10 We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise!

We are weak, but you are strong!

You are honoured, we are dishonoured!

The thing is this, that your leaders get it wrong (everyone gets things wrong),

But when **we** get it wrong - it is very public.

It's possible for a member of the church to fall and for them to be restored without the 'world and his dog' knowing the ins-and outs of the entire affair

Not so for leaders – we live in a goldfish bowl – when we get it wrong everyone sees

Our Family's get it wrong, and when they do it is very public – everyone knows.

The Vicar's life is a worked example.

Whether they want it to be or not – that's just the truth of it.

We are on display, we are a spectacle for the whole world,

Everyone sees what we do – including Uncle Tom Cobble and all!

Now this can't be changed, this is how it is,

but the scales that we use to judge our leaders are much more sensitive, much more extreme and much more judgemental than the scales we use to judge ourselves

And because of this many Vicars crumble,

many Vicars marriages fall apart and

many Vicars children end up going off the rails.

To be a leader is to be an easy target

2.2 And to carry our cross

v11 To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags,

we are brutally treated, we are homeless.

v12 We work hard with our own hands.

When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it;

when we are slandered, we answer kindly.

Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.

Paul's context is obviously more extreme than ours - but being a Rector is harder work than I could've ever have imagined,

It's 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The phone never stops ringing, the emails never stop coming, letters that need answers are always popping through the door.

You get 1 day off – and even then people come to the door,
phone you up with “I know its your day off but...”,
stop you when you're shopping,
its not to be unexpected.

we are also lightening rods for people's frustrations.

If you get 3 Christians in a room you end up with 7 opinions.

For some the worship is too loud, for others it should be more like Soul Survivor.

the services are too traditional, OR the services are too modern

The sermons are too long OR the sermons are not deep enough

You didn't visit me when I never told anyone I was sick

You didn't sing happy birthday to me on Sunday

You didn't reply to the 97th email I sent you that day

we are accused of not praying enough,

of not being filled with the Spirit enough,

of not caring enough

Jesus said *“If anyone would come after me, let himself take up his cross and follow me...”*

What this means is that

- you will be condemned for the things that you **didn't** say,
- you will be condemned for the things that you **did** say but which have been taken out of context; and
- you will be condemned for the things that you **did** say, which are **true**, but which people don't like.

And having weathered all of that - then we get to the real stuff

People you love are hurting.

People you care about are dying.

Friends are miscarrying.

Marriages are in trauma.

You cry alongside those who have been raped, abused and caught in addiction

And there is more hurt in a single congregation than a life time of listening could ever meet.

And that is why we must carry a cross because it's the only way to find God's salvation...

And

2.3 You need to be like us

v14 I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children.

Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ (that means angels), you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.

v16 Therefore I urge you to imitate me.

Look after your leaders: David, Jeremy, Chris and their families especially.

Pray for their wives – it is easy for them to think that their husbands love the church more than they love them;

Pray for their children because you may not have noticed, but saying “my Dad is a Vicar – doesn't have the ‘street cred’ as ‘my Dads a fireman, a teacher or a petty thief”,

Pray for your leaders because it is one thing to fight against the world, the flesh and the Devil (so to speak)

- because that's what they signed up for;

- it is another thing to be attacked by those you have given yourself to love

- it is the most dispiriting thing in the world

But isn't that exactly what Jesus did for us?

Isn't that EXACTLY what he did for us?

Jesus was an easy target too –

he was perfect and still they slandered him.

he was right and still they misrepresented him.

he did nothing wrong and still they crucified him!

He was the lightning rod for people's sin and he took it on the chin.

He was called the scum of the earth,

He became the rubbish dump for the world

He carried his cross and we crucified him on it

But through it, he made your salvation.

through it you found God

through it he gave you eternal life; and

through it

you saw love,

you experienced forgiveness,

you understood the most precious mystery of life: that God thinks you are valuable enough to die for!

So if you are a Christian (especially if you are a Christian at school)

You may well find yourself alone and isolated.

You may well find yourself in a minority of one.

You may well be attacked for

- things you **didn't** say,

- things you **did** say but which were misunderstood; and
- things you meant, which are true, but people don't like

But if you will commit to NOT seeking the applause of men, but the applause of ONE

if you would be faithful

If you would carry your cross

Through your life you will show others the way of salvation

through you they can find God

through you, you will show them eternal life; and

through you they will

see love,

experience forgiveness and

understand the most precious mystery of the Universe that they too are loved by God

and you?

You will experience God's smile, his praise, and life – and it will so utterly and completely worth it.