

# Sermon

Sunday 2 August 2020

2 Corinthians 1:12-22

Our Plans or God's Plans?

## Introduction

Looking back on this period of lock down, I fear what my family will remember most is me coming into the living room after they have started watching a film on the television, sitting down and saying, "What's happening now?"

## 2 Corinthians

Our reading from 2 Corinthians has us joining Paul in the middle of something – a crisis.

This is the last letter the Apostle Paul wrote which we know about. And it is not the second letter to the church in Corinth.

It is probably letter number five.

What we call 1 Corinthians is actually 2 Corinthians because Paul refers to a previous letter.

And what we call 2 Corinthians is actually 4 Corinthians because it's clear it was preceded by a sever letter we have not copy of.

The real 1 Corinthians and 3 Corinthians are missing

And the story is not over because we call “ Corinthians is actually the fourth and fifth letter combined.

I need to get out more.

Paul wrote lots of letters – full of promises and plans.

Corinth

Easier subject. Corinth. We know about it.

A wealthy ancient Greek city famous for its temple to Aphrodite complete with a thousand courtesans. Hence the issues of immorality Paul was dealing with.

That was Old Greek Corinth. It was overrun by the Romans in 146 BC, rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 44BC. It became New Roman Corinth.

By Paul’s day it was a trading city full of Roman colonists including a strong Jewish community.

In 1858 New Roman Corinth had become Old Roman Corinth which was destroyed by an earthquake. And New New Corinth was built three and half miles to the north east.

Paul

What do we know about Paul. Well, we was not in Corinth. If he was, he would not need to write letter. We was in Ephesus on a mission and also had to squeeze in a trip to address a church crisis in Macedonia.

## Corinth

And what do we know about the church in Corinth. A nightmare.

Issues of immorality. Evidence of church leaders having to make difficult decisions about people or a person.

## People.

Talking of people, Paul sent Timothy and Titus to Corinth. And probably met Titus in Macedonia for a debrief which is why he sent a letter from Macedonia and then another when he got back to Ephesus.

## Persecution

And maybe there was some persecution and illness thrown in as well. So, if you remember the five letters.

5 letters, three churches, two in crisis, two special envoys.

Dusty roads – stormy seas.

If you are not following – do not worry. The point is Paul almost certainly had promised to do and he has now got to make amends.

A visit perhaps. Maybe several. His plans were in tatters.

He's desperate to make sure that his own shortcomings have not damaged his gospel mission. Some people might be rather keen to undermine his authority.

## The Letter

Now follows a lesson in crisis management.

Thanks

Verse 11 – just before our reading he gives thanks to God for his grace. This is Paul’s code for “miraculously I’m not dead yet”.

## Verse 12

Verse 12. Now this is our boast.

When Paul uses boast substitute the expression “we can be rightfully proud”. What he is saying is that he has been exceptionally careful to act in an exemplary way. His example has been essential in leading the church in Corinth through their difficulties.

And yet he has not resorted to what we might call tactics or politics – worldly wisdom he calls it - but has instead preached a message of God’s grace.

And he has good reason to want to clear up the situation because some are accusing him of writing one thing but meaning another so he says, “we do not write to you anything you cannot read or understand”.

## The Vision

Crucially, he looks to the future. One day we will be rightfully proud of each other – how I conducted myself and how you reacted – in front of Jesus.

You could call this the pact of Christian leadership. One day we will altogether be proud of our conduct in front of Christ.

### Travel Plans

And having reached this high-point, Paul moves on to explain the chaos of his attempts to visit Corinth. He uses the worldly expression again. I did not do this in a worldly way, saying one thing and meaning another. Say yes when you mean yes and no when you mean no. No weasel words.

He may well be referring to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:37 comes to mind. Say yes when you mean yes, no when you mean no. Anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

And he concludes the argument "it is God who makes us and you stand firm in Christ".

### Middle

You have to remember we have come in on the middle of a story here – a very painful one.

Paul's approach is masterful. He says, my plans have not worked out. But there is only one good outcome here and that is if us all to be proud of our conduct in front of Christ.

## Political

We have heard politicians of all persuasions in many nations speaking of their conduct in the COVID crisis.

Here is a question: How do you admit you have got something wrong, without it diminishing your own authority?

If your authority is centred on always being right you will one day trip up. Man-made plans, unlike God-made plans, are prone to failure.

Nobody has held on to authority by always being right.

You might have a run of luck but at some point, it will run out. Being right gives way to appearing to be right. And the process of always appearing to be right is not an honest one and lacks integrity.

Authority through always being right does not work.

## Paul

Paul stays clear of this. He admits he is at the mercy of the grace of God to start with.

He does not try and twist the language around to avoid any blame.

And he looks forward to a day when both parties can be rightfully proud under the gaze of Jesus. "Boast" is the word he uses.

## The Catch

It does not sound easy but it makes sense.

There is one catch.

It hinges on an old-fashioned concept of integrity. Paul rightly points out that his manmade plans are fallible. He is not in control of everything.

His authority stems from his conduct with the church in Corinth which has been exemplary. His authority comes not from showing he is always right and executes plans perfectly, but that he always has had the right motive and is honest in his words and actions.

The Christian life is about Godly motives and worldly plans. God wants us to be honest, not infallible.

## The Lesson

And this is what the world needs now.

A chaotic world needs people with the right motives, not experts in defending their own track records. Man-made plans never work out flawlessly in a crisis.

Tale a lesson from the Apostle Paul.

A crisis in a Corinth. Great expectations in Ephesus.  
Madness in Macedonia.

Two special envoys.

Six letters. (I totally forgot to mention that the church in Corinth also wrote to Paul!)

A man of integrity, eyes fixed on the day when we can all be proud of our conduct in front of Christ.

If we fill the world with men and women like that, and the flawed plans of man add up to God's perfect plan of salvation.

Amen.