



Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God that is in Corinth, all of you sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christie Watson is a retired paediatric nurse. When the pandemic started, despite feeling a bit rusty (her words), she offered to help out at her old hospital. With the encouragement of her teenage children, she found herself running across Westminster Bridge: “I think of the nurses I have worked with, those expert and compassionate people, and what they have taught me. I get to stand next to them, for a while at least. This pull of my feet and my heart and my head is older and deeper than I can describe in language. Perhaps for me, at least, this is a calling.” (Christie’s story will be published in her book, *The Courage to Care*, on 17th Sept.)

Paul knew that sense of calling, that “pull of my feet and my heart and my head”, something “older and deeper than I can describe in language”. For him, it went back to the time Jesus spoke to him on the Damascus Road — knocked him off his high horse, picked him up, and turned him around and said, “I’ve got a job for you to do”. You can read Paul’s story in Acts ch.9 (or in his own words in Galatians ch.1). That sense of being *called* — that sense of what we call *vocation* — is what sent Paul to Corinth in the first place, and what keeps him going back, time and time again, to keep in touch with the church, to care for them and help them grow closer to God. That’s what he means by being *called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ* — it’s a task that Jesus gave him to do. It’s a simple answer to the question, What makes you do it? What keeps you going back? I’m doing this because he asked me to.

But vocation isn’t only for vicars — or nurses — or apostles! That sense of being *called* is part of the basic experience of every Christian. We may not have that dramatic turn-around that Paul had — it may be something you’ve always known, or it may be something that just grows in you. But at bottom, what keeps us going, what holds us

together, is as simple and as personal as responding to a voice: *“I heard the call, Come follow — that was all.”*

Paul is going to have some fairly negative things to say to this church. So it is important at the outset to get straight all the positive things which are also true about them, and which remain true despite their problems — the things which make this group of people a church, in fact the things which make any group of people a church. So he begins his letter by reminding the Christians at Corinth (and us) of five key **foundation-stones** of our faith.

- to be a Christian is to be **called by God**. Calling is about naming -- picking out the individual in the crowd. The Christian life begins with an encounter at the deepest level of identity (*I have called you by name: you are Mine*: Isaiah 43.1-7). But the initiative is God's: it is God who takes a persecutor and turns him into an apostle (v.1), or takes a motley collection of individuals, with all their different backgrounds and prejudices, and turns them into “the church of God in Corinth” (v.2).
- to be a Christian is to be **called in grace** (v.4). “Grace” is a favourite word of Paul's: it stresses that God's call is a gift (the words are linked in Greek), or rather a shower of gifts, poured out on the undeserving. So Paul can describe this young church, without any irony, as “enriched in every way” (v.5) and “not lacking in any spiritual gift” (v.7). This is a church humming with activity and bursting with life — though not always in the right direction.
- to be a Christian is to be **called to be holy** (v.2). Most of us don't think of ourselves as “saints”! But the word means “holy,” and that's all part of the process of becoming a church — forging a new, distinctive identity which sets this group of people apart from their neighbours (1.22-24). But yet it's a holiness rooted in the everyday world, a holiness that belongs in Corinth (or Cheshire) as much as it does in Jerusalem. How this works out in practice is a large part of what the letter is all about -- with some surprising answers, as we shall see.
- to be a Christian is to be **called in hope** (vv.7-8). Christian faith always has a future aspect, and the final section of the letter deals with this in some detail (ch.15). Sometimes it feels like a tough call to keep on hoping, to keep on faithfully keeping on. The “not yet” of our salvation often feels more pressing than the “now”. But our hope doesn't depend on our own strength but on God's (v.9): *The one who called you is faithful, and he will do what he promised* (1 Thess 5.24). God's grace is not just there at the beginning of the Christian life: it's there all the way through, a constant undercurrent of strength and renewal (v.8).
- and finally: to be a Christian is to be **called into fellowship** (v.9). As Christians we are called into a partnership with Christ, a sharing in his resurrection life: that's what being a Christian means. But that vertical relationship also involves a horizontal

relationship with others on the same journey: it's not just about me and God, but about me and God and them. (What, *them?* Yup, them too.) Being a church means being called to be part of a team -- called to a journey, not alone, but with *all those in every place who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours* (v.2). And that's quite a partnership!

I heard Him call ----
"Come, follow," that was all.
My gold grew dim
My soul went after Him
I rose and followed, that was all.
Who would not follow
If they heard Him call?

God bless,
Loveday

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