

Consider your calling: 1 Corinthians 1.26-31

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

Holy Trinity Church was just across the road from the house where I grew up in Huddersfield. My Dad was one of the sidesmen, so when he was on duty we got to go into the vestry and help him count the collection. I realized quite early on in life that Church was a place where some people were more important than others. (The sidesmen — and my Dad — were the most important. Obviously.)

One of the other sidesmen was Mr Clegg, a tall, lugubrious gentleman whom I knew from weekdays as the caretaker at my school (Birkby County Infants, in case you're wondering). Even at the age of six, back in the very status-conscious 1950s, I knew that being the caretaker put you pretty much down at the bottom of the ladder in the school hierarchy. (As an adult, of course I know better — the caretaker is extremely important in a school or any other public building.) But here he was, handing out the hymnbooks at church — just as important as my Dad!

That church taught me a lot of things (like how to sing the Prayer Book responses) for which I'm grateful. But that little jolt about the different status-values between church and school was probably one of the most enduring. Church ought to be a place where values are different — where status roles are reversed. Church ought to be a place where the world's status checklist is irrelevant, because the only status that matters is being a child of God. A place where the smart and well-educated Apollos can be taken on one side and quietly put right about a few things by two shopkeepers — and one of them a woman! (Acts 19.26). A place where we know we are valued, not because of our job or our bank-balance or the size of our house, but because we are valued by God, and because God has poured out on us all the infinite riches of *his* strength, *his* wisdom, *his* goodness in Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1.30).

It ought to be — but is it? Status was extremely important in Corinth. It was a celebrity culture, where things like wealth and birth really mattered. It was a highly competitive culture — “if you've got it, flaunt it”. So Paul's insistence that Christians shouldn't indulge in “boasting” (a recurrent theme in this letter, as we shall see) was really counter-cultural (v.31). Why ever not? It's what everybody does.

The trouble is, it's all too easy for us as Christians to adopt a new, spiritual-sounding “flavour of the month” without changing our underlying patterns of thought. So the rival fan-clubs for Paul, Apollos and Cephas (vv.10-17) probably felt they were really getting into their new faith — when actually they were just turning it into a Christian version of Celebrity “It's a Knock-out”.

Paul knew that from personal experience. It's what he talks about in the Epistle to the Romans, when he calls us to be “not conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Romans 12.2). He knew that this process of inner transformation means becoming conformed to the pattern of vulnerability that Christ showed on the cross, being drawn ever deeper into

the self-forgetful love of God. And that's not just about putting on a new uniform: it's a long and costly process of changing our underlying patterns of thought, allowing God's Holy Spirit to make us more like Jesus — “a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything”, as T.S. Eliot puts it.

But Paul also knew that there's no other way forward, for those who are “called into the fellowship of his Son” (v.9): “I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Philippians 3.12). However long it takes, however many mistakes we make along the way, however often the church gets it wrong — that's what it means to be “called by God”. The Corinthians (as we shall see) quite often got it wrong — just as we do. But our calling, like theirs, rests not on our strength or our talents but on the faithfulness of God, *who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine: to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations, forever and ever. Amen!* (Ephesians 3.30-31).

God bless,
Loveday

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