

Fear and trembling: 1 Corinthians 2.1-8

Alongside your regular team, TFTD is very glad to welcome some new contributors for this series. Today we welcome Christopher Graham, from St Peter's in Hale. Chris is on the last lap of training to be a Lay Reader. From 2009 - 2016, he was UK Information Commissioner, based in Wilmslow. He also took part in the Camino pilgrimage last summer, so he knows a bit about staying the course

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.

Even while Jesus was with them on Earth, his Disciples kept missing the point. The Gospels are full of stories of Jesus's closest followers just not getting it. And even when a parable's been unpacked for them or they've been privileged witnesses to some miraculous occurrence or divine appearance – all too often they still miss the point. Are we all that different?

Paul's message in today's reading is surely about tuning into God. And not getting distracted by overly intellectual approaches to faith and belief.

Let the facts speak. The facts – and the implications – of God's love for us are simple and compelling. As should be our response.

That does not mean that we don't need to think, and pray, and study. Being a Christian really does involve lifelong learning. But we should not get so wrapped up in philosophical speculation that we fail to live as Christians and act as Christians, showing the love of God and our love for God - and

our love for our neighbour - in practical ways in our daily lives.

Paul speaks of 'fear and trembling'. As my fellow Readers in Training approach our Licensing next month, we're finding the challenges of ministry quite scary.

I think I now know how Paul must have felt in Corinth when, on holiday in France last week, I was invited to read this very passage at Mass – but in French, of course. I did my best; but afterwards I apologised to Fr Jean for any mistakes. 'Oh, I think we can be sure that the Good Lord understands an English accent,' was the diplomatic response. And now I have plenty of time to contemplate the challenge of preaching, teaching, and leading as my wife and I do the two weeks' quarantine at home that has to follow the two week's holiday in France.

We're told that Paul may not have been a very good preacher.

Acts 20.9 tells the story of the occasion in Troas when Paul's preaching went on until midnight. One young man in the congregation, Eutychus, really was bored to death, falling three storeys from his perch in a window to the courtyard below. Paul interrupted his flow to go down and attend to the casualty, detecting signs of life. Then he went on with his sermon. (Fortunately, the boy did survive.)

My family can boast 'The World's Worst Preacher' (and it's not me, honest). The *Book of Heroic Failures* gives that award to my great-great-grandfather. Benjamin Jowett thought listening to him was like trying to eat soup with a fork. John Ruskin thought much the same, but more because, while applauding the Christian Socialist message, he didn't like the liberal theology.

So fear and trembling. We Readers in Training know all about that.

But experiencing fear does not always mean being apprehensive and nervous. It also means paying due attention and showing reverence. After all, 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Proverbs 9.10)

This is the meaning conveyed in the Liturgy of St James, familiar to us in the hymn *Let all mortal flesh keep silence*, whether to the traditional French carol tune Picardy, arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams, or the choir anthem set by Edward Bairstow.

That I think is Paul's message to the Corinthians. Keep it simple, stupid. And tune in to the fundamental truth.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' (John 3.16)

Fr Jean Icher, by the way, is a Catholic Priest, responsible for three rural churches near Albi in the South of France. When Gerald Ellison was Bishop of Chester in the 1960s, Jean was recruited by the Bishop of Albi as his interpreter for ecumenical discussions that resulted in a Chester-Albi Link and a programme of youth exchanges. Now approaching 90, Fr Jean is still interested in all things British and Irish and loves debates and discussions with his English visitors. And in his faithful ministry to his parishioners, Fr Jean shows the love of God in action.

*Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
And with fear and trembling stand;
Ponder nothing earthly-minded,
For with blessing in His hand,*

*Christ our God to earth descendeth,
Our full homage to demand.*

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