

St Brandon's, Sermon for 30th June 2024.
2 Corinthians 8:7-15, Mark 5:212-end, Psalm 30
"Paul's leadership in 2 Corinthians"

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We continue with our series of sermons looking at Paul's second letter to the Corinthians.

Today's section of the second letter that Paul wrote to the church in Corinth (around 55 CE) gives us a picture of Paul's style of leadership. Paul is concerned in this section, that the church in Corinth should show what he believes is the right and Christ-like attitude towards other churches and thereby foster good relations between all churches.

The 'generous act' he is referring to is an undertaking the Church in Corinth made the previous year to send money to the Church in Jerusalem. The congregation in Jerusalem seem to have been made up of people who were heavily reliant on alms, and as the church became more distanced from the synagogue, the funding from that source was lessening, and famine was a real prospect. Paul refers to this appeal across all churches for money in his first letter to the Corinthians, writing:

"Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come." (1 Cor. 16:1-2)

Paul is aware that the Church in Corinth has gone off the boil on this, so he applies the stick and carrot. The stick is the possibility of being humiliated by performing less well than other churches, the carrot is of future repayment in some form, that they stand to gain.

Anna in her introduction to society in Corinth described Corinthians as people who valued showing off and talking themselves up. Mike explained the particularly dense passage he preached on as needing to be

understood in terms of honour and shame: that everything depended on the good reputation of yourself and those you associated with. To be shamed or humiliated was, therefore, to be avoided at all costs. In the opening sentence of today's passage, Paul is starting by pointing to their admirable qualities: "*You excel in everything*", he says, getting them on side, "*we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking*". Why? Because our love for you means we want you to succeed and maintain your high reputation. But – there's always a 'but' – he is holding up a mirror to them by comparing their current reticent attitude, despite their wealth, with the eagerness and generosity with which the much less wealthy churches in Philippi and Thessalonica have already responded. (He has told them all about how well those Macedonian Churches have done in the preceding paragraph).

Paul describes this tactic as him, "*testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others*".

We might describe it as moral blackmail.

However, I think its subtler than that.

Paul is demonstrating a real respect for the autonomy of the congregation at Corinth. He is not commanding them but appealing to their capacity to do right, and to do it well. He believes in them, he knows they are well resourced in money and in gifts of faith, knowledge, speech and eagerness, they now need to be moved to practical action in relieving the poverty of their fellow Christians in Jerusalem. Paul is allowing them the freedom to make that decision for themselves, he is not commanding them to do it, he is pointing out it is appropriate – fitting to their reputation. Implicit in that, is the risk to the honour of their community if they are shown up by a greater response from other churches.

I named the second strategy as the carrot.

I was being a bit cynical, thinking how often a well-off community can be reluctant to become less wealthy, or get no return for their investment. After all, to have become wealthy, they probably knew well how to be shrewd and make a profit in business.

Paul points out that he is not suggesting the Corinthian congregation are expected to do all the giving while others are let off the hook “*but*”, he says, “*it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that **their** abundance may be for **your** need*”. Whether this is an abundance of spiritual wealth now, or future wealth that Jerusalem may offer is not clear but it is the principle of balance and mutuality that Paul is advocating. Give what you have, give it in kind according to what you are rich in, which may not be money, and receive with generosity, acknowledging your need, your type of poverty,

Paul is working to create unity and good relationships between the dispersed churches. It would not be surprising if successful churches, measured in worldly, material terms, wanted to distance themselves from their poor relations. No, said Paul, that is not the model our Lord Jesus Christ gave us, he gave away that you might gain.

Paul sees that relationships within and between churches must be transformed by concern and respect across social differences. He doesn't say, 'Give away all you have and follow Christ', he says 'be fair', 'give in proportion to what you have'. 'Be equal in generosity, not in actual monetary amounts', 'give and receive with a generosity of spirit'.

Paul's leadership style encourages them to move away from their social norms of how to measure success and who to value. Paul's churches were known to have been effective in integrating different social strata as a result.

The gospel story we heard is a good example of Jesus giving away that others might gain.

According to the purity laws women were unclean during and for a week after their period. This woman had bled for twelve years, for all that time she had been excluded from society. She tries to hide and go unnoticed but Jesus insists on knowing to whom he had this physical response: energy going out from him. His calling attention to her allows him to assure her of his special regard for her faith – without which the miracle couldn't have happened, and of her new status as 'daughter'. What respect and

love he shows for this woman, her suffering is his suffering. And at what cost: he has called attention now to his uncleanness: according to the purity laws he is now contaminated by her touch. As Paul puts it, "*Though [Christ] was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.*"

Jesus has reduced himself to her level of social poverty. Although the purist of the pure – rich - he has made himself unclean – poor - in order to give her the richness of healing and social integration.

This has now caused a problem for Jairus. As a leader of the synagogue, is he going to continue wanting to associate with Jesus by requesting he come to heal his daughter? News that his daughter has died would have let him off the hook, yet he decides to continue in faith, to publicly take this ritually contaminated man into his house: to trust and hold faith.

Jesus' acceptance of the haemorrhaging woman and his sharing in her uncleanness challenges and starts to break down the social and religious barriers caused by the purity laws. His love of her, who had no-one to help her, no-one on her side, came before, though not in place of, his love and desire to heal the little girl, who had loving parents to speak for her.

Paul's leadership as demonstrated in the passage we heard today is in the mould of Jesus: he too, wants to break down barriers. Paul is working to break down barriers caused by material success and boasting being the measure of worth of a person or community. He too, is working for healing and reconciliation between people and churches by encouraging mutual respect, giving and receiving according to gifts and needs, concern for others and effective social action.

In four days we will as a country, choose our next government. We have the opportunity to vote for the style of leadership that aligns best with our Christian values.

We need to take that opportunity.

What and who will you vote for that, like Paul, will be eager for this country to strive for equity, reciprocity, accommodation and balance?

To break down barriers of social and legal injustice?

I can't resist ending with a quote from today's psalm:

"Heaviness may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning."

Lord, lead us to the right path.

Amen.