

## Scripture Reading For January 13<sup>th</sup> 2019

### 1 Corinthians 2 (NIV)

2 And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. <sup>2</sup> For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. <sup>3</sup> I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. <sup>4</sup> My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, <sup>5</sup> so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

<sup>6</sup> We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. <sup>7</sup> No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. <sup>8</sup> None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. <sup>9</sup> However, as it is written: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived"—the things God has prepared for those who love him—

<sup>10</sup> these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. <sup>11</sup> For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. <sup>12</sup> What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. <sup>13</sup> This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. <sup>14</sup> The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. <sup>15</sup> The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, <sup>16</sup> for, "Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?"

But we have the mind of Christ.

## Sermon: “We Have the Mind of Christ”

The New Testament lectionary readings for the next few weeks are from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. I am starting a week early so as to set the scene! Moreover, today, the church calendar celebrates the baptism of Jesus – and you will remember that I preached more broadly on baptism last week. There is a connection though. In Luke’s account of Christ’s baptism, the Holy Spirit is described as “descending upon him in bodily form like a dove.”<sup>1</sup> And last week I mentioned that one New Testament metaphor for baptism is being reborn by the Spirit.<sup>2</sup> And, as we will see, Paul implicitly makes a big deal of that in 1 Cor 2, our reading for today. Indeed, the whole letter can be described as Paul explaining what living out the practical implications of baptism means in the day-to-day life of the church. That’s why we can still learn important things from such letters, even if there are significant cultural differences between then and now.

It is helpful to know that 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians was written a decade before the first gospel [Mark] and is thought to be one of Paul’s earliest letters.<sup>3</sup> It is known as a “corrective” letter, because, in Paul’s mind, something is wrong within the church practices of Corinth, a church he established just a few years earlier.<sup>4</sup> I will mention some of those issues in the coming weeks. In today’s reading, Paul reminds them of a foundational matter – and that relates to baptism and the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup> But before I can go into that, we need to know something about Corinth, the church there, and the background context to the letter.

Corinth, in Paul’s day was a Roman colony, one founded in 44 BC in honour of Julius Caesar, and was one of the largest cities in Greece. While many such colonies were made up of army veterans,<sup>6</sup> Corinth’s populous was based on the urban poor, such as Roman peasants exported from Italy, together with freed slaves.<sup>7</sup> By the time Paul visited Corinth in about 50-51 AD, such people would have shaped the local Greek practices<sup>8</sup> and assimilated themselves with both indigenous and other displaced peoples – including Jews.<sup>9</sup> Corinth was both a *commercial* and an *administrative* center.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 3:22; see also Matt 3:16 and Mark 1:10.

<sup>2</sup> See John 3:5; Acts 2:38. See also, <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/On-Baptism.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Written maybe 53-55AD, after 1 Thessalonians and (most likely) Galatians, and before Romans.

<sup>4</sup> See also Acts 18.

<sup>5</sup> Paul develops this further in Rom 6:1-14; 8:14-17; Gal 3:23-29 – see also 1 Cor 1:17; 6:11.

<sup>6</sup> Given the topsy-turvy politics of Rome, it was prudent to establish colonies of military veterans well away from the center of political power!

<sup>7</sup> R. A. Horsley, *1 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 23. Note that being a slave does not necessarily imply doing menial work. A slave could have high social value, such as an administrator, philosopher, or medical practitioner, by virtue of previously being part of the social elite now conquered by Rome.

<sup>8</sup> And, in the process, made the locals loyal to Rome.

<sup>9</sup> Corinth was also the home of over 20 temples, alters, and shrines, including the temples of Apollo (god of music) and Asklepios (the god of healing). Another key temple that (in earlier Greek times) brought fame to Corinth was one dedicated to Aphrodite (the goddess of love and fertility) that stood on the top of a 1500 ft tall rock outcrop just outside the city. This temple allegedly had many temple prostitutes; to be referred to as a “Corinthian girl” was not a compliment! While the quantity of prostitutes may be over exaggerated, commercial centers and ports attract all the typical vices. During the Roman era there was a temple to Venus within the city; not only was Venus the Roman equivalent of Greek Aphrodite but she was also the Mother of the Roman nation – a suitable deity for a Roman colony. (Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 48).

<sup>10</sup> Hence Latin was widely used – although Greek would be the normal language for a substantial part of the population. The area was also known for its crafts, notably bronze and pottery.

society of Corinth had many social strata, consisting of descendants of veteran soldiers and others originally from Italy, wealthy land-owners, aristocrats, administrators, financiers, merchants, craftsmen and women, labourers of various sorts, soldiers, sailors<sup>11</sup> and – of course – slaves and farmers. Like in many such cities, people relied on patronage and networking to get ahead in life.<sup>12</sup> As such, there was a competitive spirit in Corinth, one that was also present in the Church.<sup>13</sup>

It is from this multicultural and socially and economically diverse group that the “church” in Corinth was formed.<sup>14</sup> Add to those differences, people came from various religious traditions, including the civic worship of local deities and of the Roman Imperial cult! The congregational culture was inevitably complex and being their pastor must have been *both* exhilarating and a nightmare!

Given that the Church at Corinth had only been in existence for at most a few years when Paul wrote what we call 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, then there had not been a long internal *Christian* tradition to shape the life of the church. Rather it was the contrast of the Greco-Roman world with that of Judaism that was the context within which Paul proclaimed the novel culture of being together “in Christ.” This new outlook challenged other norms, such as patronage, in that through baptism a person’s social status and gender becomes irrelevant in the Christian community.<sup>15</sup> From the actual letter, however, there appears to be a disconnect between Paul’s understanding of baptism and the practical implications of what that means.

It seems that some at the church in Corinth were fascinated by “wisdom,” “spiritual” insight and experiences, and considered themselves as part of an elite “mature” group. Moreover, such people were impressed by erudite speakers who could talk eloquently and persuasively about such things. We also need to appreciate that Corinth was only 85km away from Athens and there were many itinerant philosophers and orators who would make a living by motivational speaking. Using flamboyant rhetoric and emotional manipulation, they would tell the crowds what they wanted to hear, all to elicit applause and approval from the audience. Sound familiar? And that’s what some in the Corinthian church wanted their own leaders to be like. The same is true today, not just in political leaders, but in TV evangelists and spiritual gurus; being a charismatic speaker is deemed essential to communicate effectively and for maintaining a platform. There was evidently such an influential Jewish Christian called Apollos,<sup>16</sup> originally from Alexandria in Egypt, and he had a significant local following.<sup>17</sup> He was well-educated,

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<sup>11</sup> Corinth linked two harbours, Cenchreae and Lechaion, which were connected by a stone-lined pathway on which ships were dragged across the Isthmus of Corinth. This laborious slave-driven task saved the sailors from the fearful and perilous journey south that otherwise connected sea trade between the Ionian and Aegean Seas. Remains of the 4-5 mile-long, stone-line ditch are still visible today. [Note too that Pheobe came from Cenchreae (Rom 16:1-2).]

<sup>12</sup> People also organised themselves in guilds, clubs, and voluntary associations. Note Corinth still had to pay taxes directly to Rome.

<sup>13</sup> One of Paul’s themes in 1 Corinthians is the issue of “boasting” (1 Cor 1:29,31; 3:21; 4:7; 5:6; 9:15-16; 13:3; 15:31).

<sup>14</sup> In reality, the “church” contained various Christian house groups or assemblies and people met in the homes of the wealthier Christians.

<sup>15</sup> See 1 Cor 12:13 and Gal 3:28.

<sup>16</sup> See 1 Cor 1:12; 3:4-6; 4:6.

<sup>17</sup> See Acts 18:24-28.

enthusiastic, and an eloquent speaker, and would therefore be perceived as being full of wisdom.<sup>18</sup> Now, just to be clear, Paul was *not* saying Apollos was a charlatan or leading people astray from the gospel message.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, at the beginning of the letter, Paul seems to need to re-establish his own authority to address the Corinthians, in order for them to take him seriously.<sup>20</sup> And he goes about that in a clever way, like a fisherman playing a fish on his line before landing his catch.

How does he do that? Paul demonstrates his own remarkable rhetorical skills to grab their attention and, in a sense, to shame them to at least listen to his message. He does this through *sarcasm* and *irony*,<sup>21</sup> and using *hyperbole* to paint a black-and-white picture of opposing extremes to highlight the shock value and make people pay attention. Using their own favourite terms of “wisdom” and “the mature,”<sup>22</sup> Paul contrasts them to those they deem spiritual novices or having lesser spiritual attainment. And in the process, Paul sets up a trap which he later springs in 3:1.<sup>23</sup>

Let me give an example: Paul contrasts wisdom with foolishness and strength with weakness.<sup>24</sup> In 1 Cor 1:25 and 27, he writes: “For the *foolishness* of God is wiser than human *wisdom*, and the *weakness* of God is stronger than human *strength*. . . God chose the *foolish* things of the world to shame the *wise*; God chose the *weak* things of the world to shame the *strong*.” And the ultimate foolish thing that turns out to be super-powerful is “*Christ crucified*”!<sup>25</sup>

Paul then writes: “When I came to you, I did not come with (superior) eloquence or (human) wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony<sup>26</sup> about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him *crucified*. . . My conversation and preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This contrast makes sense in light of 1 Cor 1:17; 2:1, 4-5. [There is also conjecture that Apollos was the author of Hebrews.]

<sup>19</sup> See 1 Cor 3:5-9 and Acts 18:24-28.

<sup>20</sup> In 1 Cor 3:6, Paul makes his own primacy clear: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” He then changes the metaphor: “like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it...” (3:10). The implication is clear: while the builder gets appropriate credit, the one who lays the foundation is worthy of even more merit!

<sup>21</sup> This form of literary prowess requires you to see *through* the *literal* text to the Greek word-play and overall context and argument. This requires a sophisticated degree of theological, biblical, and linguistic skill – and the diversity of words used in the various translations reveals that is not a simple task. (This also reveals the various biases of the interpreters!)

<sup>22</sup> The terms “wisdom” (*sophia*) and “the mature” (*teleioi*) also appear frequently in the writings of Philo of Alexandria to describe those who ‘aspire’ (*sic*) to advanced spiritual insight and/or “perfection.” The wisdom “of this world/age” is closely associated with personal ambition and can therefore degenerate into self-defeating, illusionary cleverness.

<sup>23</sup> 1 Cor 3:1-3a: “Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly.” In other words, spiritual “maturity” is defined, with a final ironic twist, as those who are acting from love, rather than in jealousy and quarrelling. Authentic wisdom is characterised by unity and humility rather than by special knowledge or rhetorical skill.

<sup>24</sup> 1 Cor 1:18-25.

<sup>25</sup> 1 Cor 1:21-24.

<sup>26</sup> The NRSV translates “testimony” as “mystery” because the two Greek words are very similar and both appear in the various ancient manuscripts.

<sup>27</sup> 1 Cor 2:1-2,4-5.

What does this mean and, just as importantly, what it does *not* mean? First, preaching “only Jesus Christ in him crucified” is an example of *hyperbole* or exaggeration and serves to focus on his central point: namely, that the Corinthians’ own faith was *not* an outcome of some refined discourse but by the straightforward story of Jesus, one that has at its heart the foolishness of a crucified Messiah.<sup>28</sup> People today have the same problem; speak of “loving your neighbour” and you may get some traction, but talk of the significance of the death of Jesus and people will switch off. But for Paul, if there is no cross, then there is no “good news.” Second, Paul’s mention of “a demonstration of the Spirit’s power” need not be narrowly interpreted as miracles, but saying that their conversion is down to the *God’s* initiative and power at work in their lives, *not* as a direct consequence of the any brilliance in Paul’s own oratory.<sup>29</sup> Third, this does not necessarily mean that Paul was a poor preacher,<sup>30</sup> nor is it an excuse for shabby preaching today, nor an endorsement of anti-intellectualism!<sup>31</sup> However, the person in the pulpit does not have the *power* to *create* faith in the hearers. Preachers’ bear witness to “Christ crucified” to the best of their ability but, ultimately, it is the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit that brings a person to faith. This is worth remembering because, in our consumer society, some are inclined to think the church is just another commercial enterprise with the minister as its salesman trying to get people to choose its “product”! Furthermore, many ordinary believers shrink from sharing their own faith because they feel unqualified or incapable of explaining it well. This would be a serious objection if faith were purely the result of persuasive, sophisticated arguments. But Paul teaches that faith is the result of *God’s* power, which *can* and *does* work through the simple sharing of humble [and often unimpressive] stories of people’s trust and confidence in God – so be encouraged to share your own stories!

Paul’s goes on: “Yet among ‘the mature’ we *do* speak wisdom, though it’s *not* the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish.”<sup>32</sup> Here he uses Jewish apocalyptic language by speaking of the doomed rulers and wisdom “of this age.”<sup>33</sup> This is to be contrasted with the “age to come,” or the “new creation,” which has begun through the crucified, risen, and glorified Christ.<sup>34</sup> The wisdom Paul speaks of is, therefore, *God’s* shocking wisdom of “Christ crucified,” which is something that “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor mind conceived.”<sup>35</sup> No one would have guessed that, except those who *love* God [i.e., *God’s* people] and whose hearts have been prepared by God [or *God’s* Spirit].

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<sup>28</sup> 1 Cor 1:22-24.

<sup>29</sup> For Paul, wisdom is, first and foremost, a “*who*,” rather than merely a body of knowledge or a human capacity or achievement; Christ is the *person* who surpasses all knowledge and all prior revelation.

<sup>30</sup> Regardless of 2 Cor 4:7, 10:10, 11:6, we need to be careful in how we interpret Paul’s apparent humility or self-depreciation because contemporary rhetorical training urged orators say precisely that about themselves! Moreover, given the way Luke describes Paul’s mission in Athens (Acts 17:16-33), this could be an example of Paul’s use of *irony/sarcasm*.

<sup>31</sup> These verses don’t provide an argument against a disciplined, rigorous, and reasonable communication of the gospel. Paul rejects pleasing the audience by telling them precisely what they want to hear and, in the process, cheapen the gospel.

<sup>32</sup> 1 Cor 2:6. It is because the tone changes here significantly from 1 Cor 1:18-2:5 that scholars see this as rhetorical *irony*!

<sup>33</sup> There is nothing in this passage to suggest that the “rulers of this age” are demonic powers; see 1 Cor 1:26-28; 2:8.

<sup>34</sup> 1 Cor 2:8.

<sup>35</sup> 1 Cor 2:9. This verse is often misquoted as speaking about heaven! Note, there is no precise Old Testament verse to correspond to this quote, though it has similarities to Isa 64:3-4 and 52:15.

Now to those Corinthian Christians who were seeking lofty, spiritual mysteries, Paul makes it clear that *God's* wisdom is *revealed* by the Holy Spirit, for the divine "Spirit searches everything, even *the depths of God*."<sup>36</sup> He then goes on to remind them of the consequences of their own baptism, "Now we have received *not* the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God."<sup>37</sup> In other words, through baptism Paul differentiates between those "of this age" and those born in the new age of the Holy Spirit. He then continues, "And we speak of these things in words *not* taught by human wisdom but taught by God's Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual."<sup>38</sup> It is important to state here that Paul is *not* distinguishing between two kinds of Christians, but between those people who live their lives purely on a human level<sup>39</sup> and those who are baptised, and who have therefore received the Spirit.<sup>40</sup> Paul and other Christians can now speak about the profound mystery concerning God and the cross of Christ *not* because they have received advanced instruction, but because they have been taught by the Spirit. Another way of putting this is to say that the deep truths about God<sup>41</sup> are revealed *not* through philosophy but through prophecy, *not* through rhetoric but by revelation.

Paul concludes by quoting from Isaiah 40:13. The *Hebrew* text reads, "Who can fathom the *Spirit* of the LORD, or instruct the LORD as his counselor?" The obvious answer is, "No one can presume to know or advise God"! Paul quotes the *Greek* (LXX) version, which says, "Who has known the *mind* of the Lord so as to instruct him?" And Paul answers this question very differently, "*We have the mind of Christ*." For Paul, the "mind of Christ" is synonymous with the "Spirit of Christ," moreover he also understands the "Lord" to be Jesus himself! This is an audacious claim to make! Who has known the mind of God? The answer, says Paul, *is us*! We, unlike those of this age, have received the *Spirit* or, alternatively, have the *mind* of Christ!<sup>42</sup> The very same Spirit who, Paul says earlier, intimately knows the very being of God.<sup>43</sup> And because the Spirit explores the very depths of God's self, that same Spirit can convey authentically the heart and mind of God in Christ *to us*. This is heady stuff and it takes time to digest; this is typical of Paul's writings! But his key point here is that those who seek wisdom need look no further than the "crucified Christ."

Where do *we* look for wisdom today? If you want information, try the internet! If you want knowledge, go to the Library or take a university course. But what about wisdom? Some go to self-help books. Others look to "spiritual advisors" or to some other personage, or to psychologists. Some see wisdom in Eastern and other mystical religions. Some look for wisdom *inside* themselves. The quest for

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<sup>36</sup> 1 Cor 2:10; this is reiterated in 2:11b. While we today see this through a *trinitarian* lens, Paul's use of the 'Spirit' here is not inconsistent with this view.

<sup>37</sup> 1 Cor 2:12a.

<sup>38</sup> 1 Cor 2:13.

<sup>39</sup> Or who belong "to the old age." In 1 Cor 2:14, the undiscerning person lives on the basis of a mere human life-force (*psyche*) and not in response to the action of the Holy Spirit (*pneuma*).

<sup>40</sup> Paul never uses the word "Christian" in his letters, but here calls them "spiritual."

<sup>41</sup> See also Dan 2:22.

<sup>42</sup> It also important to understand this *collectively, as the Church*, not with a Western sense of individualism.

<sup>43</sup> 1 Cor 2:10. This, then, is Paul's "theology of the (Holy) Spirit" and he develops its practical implications later in the letter.

spirituality is on the rise, which is ironic given our secular culture sees reality only in *material* terms. Not unsurprisingly, the idea of a “crucified Christ” is dismissed as sheer foolishness, but some, in all seriousness, entertain some pretty odd alternative beliefs! Paul says that to be wise,<sup>44</sup> or spiritually mature, is to be *transformed* by the Spirit of God.

Many individual Christians and churches downplay, or fail to appreciate and cultivate, this life of the Spirit. It is all too easy for us as a church, who have been given the mind of Christ, to desire financial security and rely purely on our own ingenuity and knowledge to solve every problem. We look for human solutions to grow our congregations which, though helpful, tend to reduce complex questions to simplistic, technical solutions that inherently omit the life of the Spirit. To mature as a church, and as individuals, requires us to passionately seek the Spirit of Christ, who will reveal to us the wisdom we seek and satisfy our thirst.

In conclusion, I will end with a metaphor I have used before, so forgive me as I use it again. It does, however, connect the waters of baptism with the Great Lakes that surround us. Many Christians walk in the fresh water and enjoy that experience on a summer’s day. It doesn’t take too long for some to get bored and seek experiences in other waters, perhaps tasting of chlorine or salt. However, in seeking alternatives they turn their backs on the beckoning deeper water of the Lake. Paul invites those who seek wisdom<sup>45</sup> to wade in deeper into the water. Not just until it is chest-high, but to swim in it. To live in faith because you can’t touch the bottom! It’s both scary and exhilarating at the same time! The Lake-water is, of course, exactly the same, but it is a very different experience from paddling in it as children to swimming in it as adults.<sup>46</sup> This is analogous to the Spirit of God, or the mind of Christ, that Paul invites to explore. That is the route to spiritual maturity, the means of wisdom. Let us pray.

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<sup>44</sup> For Paul, wisdom is to be discovered in a most unlikely place: the cross. Moreover, Paul – in claiming we have the mind of Christ – infers that we share of Christ’s own knowledge and love of the Father.

<sup>45</sup> Jesus, in John 10:10b says, “I come that you might have life and have it to the full.”

<sup>46</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 3:1-2.