

Epiphany IV (A)
Micah 6.1-8/ Psalm 15/I Corinthians 1.18-31/Matthew 5.1-12
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
3 February 2008

How to Boast

~Paul H. Friesen~

I have a book on a shelf near my desk at home, a gift with an inscription from my father-in-law inside the cover. In it he quotes the last, famous verse of today's Bible reading from the prophet Micah: 'He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.' The book, you might be surprised to hear, has the title *John Ludlow: The Autobiography of a Christian Socialist*.

My father-in-law is sympathetic to many worthy causes. But you could hardly accuse him of being a socialist! However, he does read and think about the Bible. And he did the right thing in connecting the voice of the prophet to the message of the group who called themselves 'Christian Socialists'. The prophet wanted to *cut through the religious language about worship to get to the heart of the truth about worship*. Micah said: 'With what shall I come before the Lord...with burnt offerings...with thousands of rams...with my firstborn?' No, said Micah. True worship, true sacrifice to God, is a matter of giving ourselves over to loving humanity, and living a life of justice with a humble heart.

Likewise the so-called 'Christian Socialists' of 150 years ago wanted to *cut through the fancy language of economic and political theories about social progress—to get to the truth about the awful state* of the hundreds of thousands of workers who lived in extreme poverty in London, England. This group were not political revolutionaries. They were Anglican lawyers and priests who voted for the Tories, the Conservative party of their day.

But the word 'socialism' was brand new in English then, not spoiled, as it is now, and it caught people's attention. It held out the promise of a new way of thinking in which self-interest was replaced by working co-operatively, as Christians, for the good of the whole of society. But people were even more interested when this group began to support small economic projects. In this way workers thrown out of employment could contribute to society, and manage their own projects, and invest their profits to start new projects with more employment for more jobless workers. The group believed this was an extension of their worship, and prayer, and Bible study.

Looking back now, we see that these 'Christian Socialists' failed to change the tragic, ruthless economy in their own day. And the word 'socialism' was hijacked by folks who often had no use for Christianity. But this remains—like the prophet Micah *they cut through the rhetoric to get to the truth*. And this is exactly what St. Paul tried to do in his letter to the church in Corinth.

It is our third Sunday in the first chapter of the Apostle Paul's *First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Two weeks ago we talked about the opening verses, where the Apostle kept talking about how God 'called' us—he *cut through the language about how well we performed as human beings—or not*—to remind us that God's move is the first move. We're a church because God called us out of his love for us—that's why we can answer. We answer with Sunday worship and the worship we offer with our lives Monday to Saturday.

Last Sunday, the Bishop took us through the middle of the first chapter. She pointed out how absurd it was to say that we should be divided over who baptized us—or (we might add) how precisely we worship—or what family we come from, or what opinions we hold about this or that. The point is Jesus Christ, the one we all gather to worship—every thing else is secondary. Today, the closing verses of the Apostle's first chapter makes the same point a third way—it *cuts through the language about who we were* when we first came into a conscious relationship with Christ and *who we are now* when we come to Christ. Does it matter that some of us are attracted to Christ by a thirst for learning and knowledge, and others by the search for a quest for social and emotional and spiritual well-being? This is what the Apostle wants to talk about.

Well, the Apostle knew we were all different from each other, and likely always would be. But he preached the Gospel that went beyond our differences and that tied us all together. The Apostle put it bluntly to the members of the church in Corinth, as he summed up : 'Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom but we proclaim Christ crucified...God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.'

The Apostle Paul was a Jewish rabbi who had studied Greek philosophy, so we know that he said these words out of personal experience. He meant this; whatever differing desires and needs might have led us to Christ (and still lead us) are not worthless, but they are not the point of our journey—it is Christ himself.

Critics of Christianity have always been quick to jump on this. And I think we need to hear these criticisms of our Christian family, because we learn about ourselves when we hear them. About 100 years after Paul wrote the words we just heard, a certain Greek writer from Alexandria in Egypt, by the name of Celsus, wrote a famous book against both Christ and Christians. And Celsus made savage criticisms against the church of his day:

It is only "only foolish and low individuals, and persons devoid of perception, and slaves, and women, and children, of whom the teachers of the divine word wish to make converts...

[In fact] The following are the rules laid down by [the Christians]. 'Let no one come to us who has been instructed, or who is wise or prudent—by which words,

acknowledging that such individuals are worthy of their God, [the Christians] manifestly show that they desire and are able to gain over only the silly, and the mean, and the stupid, with women and children."¹

If this criticism were made today, don't you think Christians would be boycotting Celsus' publisher, and sending out emails urging people not to go the film based on the book, and perhaps seeking legal advice on how to sue Celsus? And perhaps they would be getting a Christian MP to raise the matter in parliament and demand an apology because Peter Mansbridge had recently interviewed Celsus on television without inviting a prestigious Christian theologian to join them?

That would be sad—very sad. Because the Apostle set the example by taking all the criticisms on the chin. He took the criticisms and turned them upside down, which is what the Gospel does. He said: 'To those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.' Maybe we need to learn to take criticisms of the church in the chin like the apostle.

We all have different temperaments and personalities and experiences and opinions. But we worship one Christ who rises above all that to weave us together. We don't confess a Christ who is the lowest common denominator, but a Christ, the Christ, who is our highest common denominator.

There were great minds in the early church. There were aristocrats, and important officials.

There were those with impeccable religious credentials and spotless moral records... but for the most part there were those who were slaves, and from ethnic minorities and those who were just uneducated and poor—the very average, normal people of their day. And the gift these folks offered to the important people in the church was their humble presence in its midst—it reminded every single person in the church that in fact everyone was there because of the power and wisdom of the Gospel, not because of any special qualifications they brought with them.

But Paul didn't set out to explain the Gospel with negatives. That didn't get him and won't get us anywhere. If who we are doesn't explain why God called us, something else does matter. It is the Gospel itself, that came to us in Jesus Christ—in Jesus' birth and life and death and resurrection. This is what we have come to celebrate together today!

¹ These quotations, and others criticizing Christians, were taken from Celsus' famous book *The True Word* (about 180 a.d.) and can be found translated into English in various books and also on various websites: see bluflon.edu/~humanities/1/celsus.htm In fact, it is only because the Christian theologian Origen quoted Celsus, in his own book *Against Celsus* (248 a.d.) that we have a record of Celsus' severe criticisms!

The Apostle concludes his first chapter with some words about the Gospel: 'God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, on order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'

To use the Apostle's words, what should we 'boast' about today? What are we proud of today, as Christians, who happen to be worshipping at St. Paul's? If we cut right through to the centre of our faith, what do we find?

Is it generations of our family who have worshipped here? Is it faithfulness to an old and proven form of worship? Is it our accomplishments in education and career, or our personal qualities—is it how profoundly intellectual or deeply emotional we think our faith is? Is it how sophisticated and modern our form of worship is—or how spiritual our language is?

Is God interested in all of this? God is! It makes us who we are!

But none of this explains why we are here together, called by God to worship Jesus Christ. We are here to offer who we are as a sacrifice to God, but with our eyes fixed on Jesus. As we heard it read: 'God is the source of our life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification and redemption, on order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'

Why will new folks join us in worship in the coming months? Why will the rest of us remain? Will it be the beauty of the sanctuary? Will it be the wisdom of words spoken, or the emotional power of worship? Will it be the thoughtful programmes or projects put forward by our committees and staff, or our parish plan. Will it be the accomplishments of our members or the friendliness of our congregation? Our God in his mercy will use all these things we offer.

But all that we have to offer is in the praise of Jesus Christ without whom there could be no church of any kind. Christ, as we heard, is 'the source of our life.'

Why worship here—why worship in any church? *Because the source of the church's life is Jesus Christ.* If we all boast in Christ, then the charms and advantages of the things we have to offer will find their right place in our parish life. Why should we bring people to worship with us on Sunday? *So that they too can come to share in the source of our life, Jesus Christ, the one of whom we boast.*

Let's continue in worship, and cut right through to Christ. Let's pray, especially today, and throughout Lent, that we learn how to boast in Christ, together, regardless of how we worship Christ, regardless of what we have—or have not—accomplished. 'God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.' Thanks be to God that we are gathered in the name of Christ, 'the source of our life.'