

“WHAT KIND OF CHRISTIAN?”

6. Against the Grain

2 Corinthians 10:1-11

We've been reflecting over these past few weeks about what it means to call ourselves Christians, to take the name of the one whom we claim to follow – a name which was originally a term of abuse applied to the followers of Jesus Christ in first-century Antioch, but which we now proudly bear as twenty-first century disciples. We've seen that we find our identity in Jesus, becoming one with him and driving our foundations down into his word and his teaching, drawing resources from our rootedness in him. It means that we live according to his guidelines and commands, in which we can find security and strength to live as he calls us to.

And that is once again what St Paul is stressing in these words from his *Second Letter to the Corinthians*. This whole letter is a response from Paul to the situation in Corinth where things in the church have gone sadly awry in his absence. Much of it – and certainly the passage we have read today – is to do with Paul defending himself against his critics in the church. If you read through these chapters you'll see Paul's passionate response, in which he uses sarcasm, irony, emotional appeals and powerful polemic to state his case. And his main point in these verses from chapter 10 is that his critics have adopted the world's way of thinking and they are trying to measure Paul against the standards of the culture around them rather than against the standards of the teaching of Jesus and the word of God. They are using worldly criteria to judge him – in particular, his leadership – rather than looking at things from the perspective of their new-found faith.

Paul is wanting to stress that this is not the way that Christians should be behaving or thinking – these are the wrong attitudes for them to adopt. Now we'll be looking at this in a bit more detail next week, so this is, if you like, a little introduction to that, but we'll just draw a couple of thoughts from this passage this morning. Those who find their identity in Christ are counter-cultural, they go against the grain. In fact, the ideas at stake are so different from the idea and values of the world around us that it's like being in a battle, fighting a war – which explains the militaristic imagery Paul uses. But we do not wage that war “*as the world does*”, Paul says in v3. Or as Tom Wright expresses it in his translation, “*we don't fight the war in a merely human way*”. Our approach is diametrically different. Eugene Peterson's translation of these few verses in *The Message* puts it rather strikingly:

“The world is unprincipled. It's dog-eat-dog out there! The world doesn't fight fair. But we don't live or fight our battles that way—never have and never will. The tools of our trade aren't for marketing or manipulation, but they are for demolishing that entire massively corrupt culture. We use our powerful God-tools for smashing warped philosophies, tearing down barriers erected against the truth of God, fitting every loose thought and emotion and impulse into the structure of life shaped by Christ.”

We are, says Paul, to take a stand against “*arguments and pretensions*”. This is about sorting out the mind-set, the worldview, the attitudes and ideas from which our words and behaviour spring. But it’s not just a case of picking up the weapons that the world uses and adapting them for our own use. When it comes to arguments and debates, yes, we can engage with the world – and some people are very good indeed at that: C S Lewis, G K Chesterton, Malcolm Muggeridge, Alister McGrath, Tom Wright, the recently disgraced Ravi Zacharias, amongst others. Most of us are not even in their league and we shrink from engaging with people who like to think they’re cleverer than us who attack our faith. But it is not the power of the argument that wins the day. Even though, in the end, the argument for following Christ is unassailable, if we rely on our powers of argument, then it just capitulates to the thinking of the world and becomes a question of intellect or of rhetoric. I don’t think you can just argue people into the Kingdom.

No, it’s not the power *of* the argument that is our weapon. It’s the power *behind* the argument. We have, writes Paul, “*divine power to demolish strongholds*”. It’s not our powers of persuasion that make the difference, but God’s power to overcome the “*warped philosophies*” of the world – the attitudes, ideas and ideologies shaped by a flawed human understanding of what is going on in our world. As human beings, we have tried to create our own narratives of what this world is all about, our own explanations for what we see around us day by day. Scientists, philosophers, politicians, educators, psychologists, even theologians, have tried to tell us what it’s all about. And there’s an awful lot of truth in what they say, very often – I’m not dismissing them out of hand – but what they forget or ignore or reject is the truth of God’s word. It is a flawed narrative, and it is based on a flawed premise, so we can’t just argue back in the same way. We need to see God’s hand behind it all.

In fact, as Paul writes here, we must “*take captive*” these thoughts, these attitudes and ideologies, and fit them into a life shaped by Christ, the one in whom we find our identity. This is a battle for the mind, so think about what you are doing, about the words you use, about your motives and your aspirations, and measure them up against the truth of God’s word. As those who follow Jesus, we should have a different way of looking at the world, a different perspective on life. You see, this isn’t about some easy-going pluralism that spots the trends in our culture and tries to fit them into God’s unchanging truths, that adapts what God has clearly taught to the fashions of the day. This is a call from Paul to submit our thoughts, our attitudes to the unfashionably exclusive claims of Jesus Christ. He talks – again, unfashionably – of “*obedience*” to Christ.

This all fits in – in terms of vocabulary, at least – with what we read day by day in our newspapers and hear across the media about “*culture wars*”. This is a different expression of that, to be sure, but it is what we are engaged in. The culture and attitudes, the worldview and mind-set of Christianity are completely at odds with most of what we see going on around us in our world at the moment. And that has always been

the case. The thinking of the culture around us shifts from generation to generation, whereas the truth of God's word – his creative imagination, his unconditional love, his redemption of the world through his Son, his amazing grace, his call to obedience – remain the unchanging foundation for those who claim to follow Jesus.

As I've said, we'll develop this a bit more next week, but in the meantime, be encouraged as you try to live out the commands of Jesus. Don't, as Paul says here, "*look only on the surface of things*", but be confident that you belong to Christ, that your identity is in him, therefore you are inspired, protected and ultimately redeemed by the divine power of him and his Holy Spirit. And nothing whatsoever can stand against that.

For reflection and discussion

- 1) In what ways do we adopt the thinking of the world around us in our own lives and in the life of the Church? Why could that be unhelpful?
- 2) The thinking of the culture around us can change from generation to generation. Look back over the last few decades and think of some examples. How has the Church responded to this thinking?
- 3) In what ways do "*arguments and pretensions ... set themselves up against the knowledge of God*"? How can we spot that happening and what should we do about it?
- 4) What "*weapons*" that we fight with do you think Paul is talking about in *v4*? What is the "*divine power*"?
- 5) How do we "*take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ*"?