

Before the reading: What have these in common: The Mulberry Bush? The Quinloch (Farm), the new house near the nasty bend beyond Strathblane, and an ancient Temple? A nursery, a farm, a building site, and a Temple ?

Well, they are all metaphors used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 3 when talking to the Christians about themselves and the church. He had to deal with a problem in Corinth, which can surface in any congregation, in any age. In their case it was quarrelling. But there was something more serious behind it - 'worldliness'. Let's see if we, today, can learn to be the Church, in the Bible's sense of the word.

1 Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly -mere infants in Christ.

2 I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.

3 You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?

4 For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?

5 What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe - as the Lord has assigned to each his task.

6 I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.

7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

8 The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labour.

9 For we are God's fellow-workers; you are God's field; *You are also God's building.*

10 By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds.

11 For no-one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

12 If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw,

13 his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.

14 If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward.

15 If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

16 Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?

17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

Acts 18:24-28 Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures.

25 He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John.

26 He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

27 When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed.

28 For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.

Sermon starts here

Iran had a troubled end to their elections, with thousands of aggrieved voters taking to the streets shouting for their man.

Christians in Corinth were also split over individuals, in their case, preachers. Ch 3:4 has an echo of 1 Corinthians 1:12 ‘...One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas (=Peter)"; still another, "I follow Christ."' Paul was horrified! Christians have only one Saviour: Jesus.

In the forthcoming vacancy, you may be tempted to divide into groups, each promoting one kind of minister over another. In Corinth, it may have been personalities; but I suspect this was an early form of theological divide, and you will need to be careful not to let that happen in Killearn.

But division of that type was not the real problem in Corinth. It was a symptom of *worldliness*, v1 & 3, of minds that were not attuned to Jesus, but still thinking like non-Christians.

First metaphor So back then, Paul had to call some of the Christians, ‘babies, infants in Christ’

Now when a person is newly converted, that is what they are, and there is no shame about it. As we saw recently, Peter told his readers, “Like newborn babes, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.” (1 Peter 2:2)

Paul’s point is that the Corinthians had been Christians long enough that they should have been more mature; when he first came to them, he had had to keep giving them milk, not solid food, (v2), because they were worldly, acting like mere men, with (3:3) jealousy, quarrelling.

Ask any *natural* family, and you will hear about sibling rivalry; it will emerge in various ways at different ages:

stealing each others sweets

hiding each others toys

blaming the broken plate on the other saying, ‘T’was nae me.’

Divisions between brothers and sisters in a *church* family are serious. The fundamentals are so vital, differing can be deadly.

I do not mean we all have to think and act as clones of each other. Variety of opinion on non-essential matters is healthy. None of us is infallible; the consensus of a large number of people all seeking the mind of Christ is a step closer a reliable decision, so the General Assembly uses voting. It does not *guarantee* the majority is right.

Generally, we agree to differ. We do not fall out. We treat with respect those whose opinion differs from ours, looking to see why they hold their view. ‘A soft answer turns away wrath.’

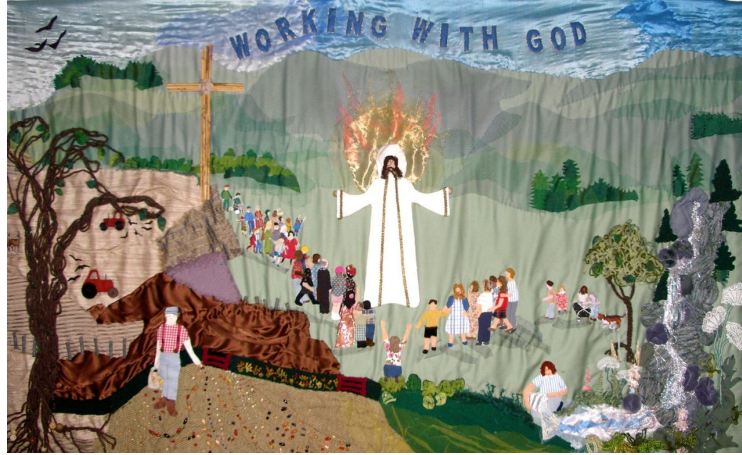
What is troubling many just now is that the majority seems to have rejected something fundamental - the inspiration of Scripture.

To allow division in the church over personalities is a sign of spiritual immaturity - to be acting like children. God’s word tells us to grow up!

But to ignore other forms of worldliness is just as bad, if not worse: God’s Word tells us to be true to fundamentals, and to recall any who stray from them, to come back to basics.

Infants have to grow.

Second metaphor: vv 5-9a the church is a field or farm.



What happens on farms? crops grow. Every farm I know uses grass in some way, and grass needs to grow.

Some hillsides have been in grass as long as anyone can remember; other places have had a definite sowing of seed.

Some is left to mature long enough to cut; other grass is kept short by sheep. But whatever the human agency at different times, it is God that has set in motion the growth. Whatever the skills or fertilisers applied to increase the growth, the underlying life is a consequence of the creative power of God.

In comparison to the majesty of God, the part played by human agents in sowing or reaping pales into near insignificance.

Humanly speaking, it is true we cannot do without the farmers and their work, to give us our daily bread;

we also cannot do without preachers and teachers in church;

but of far greater significance than the work of individuals is the growth given by God.

Paul stresses the importance of God by the word-order of v 9:

To emphasise God's part, he names him first, twice:

God's fellow workers are we

God's field are you.

God assigns a task to each of us, leaders or members, different tasks at different times (I guess mine will change in retirement) and uses our actions; but only God can give the growth.

The banner quotes from 1 Cor 3: 'Working with God'; are you in fact 'Working with God'? or are you determined to follow your own desires, and just hoping God is on your side?

Third metaphor: You are God's building.

'Building' can be a noun or a participle.

We meet to worship in a 'building'.

On a building site, workmen are engaged in 'building'. The one stresses the completion, the other the ongoing process.

We must notice two thoughts in this para:

- a) Paul continues the idea of multiple workers, but stresses the one and only possible foundation: Jesus Christ himself.

It doesn't matter which human being tries to build on that foundation: if they hope to build a church, they must stick to the foundation: Christ, his person (God the Son, part of the Trinity),

his nature (God and man in one)

his work (to live, die and rise as the representative of humanity, 'the last Adam', to reconcile humanity to God).

If you try to abstract one part of his *teaching*, e.g. 'Love your neighbour', or reduce it to a handful of rules based on only one metaphor like this building one, or four absolutes or whatever, you can miss the *person*. The foundation is not his teaching, but himself, his person and work, a relationship with himself.

So we need to ask ourselves: What is foundational in our life and thinking? ... Is it actually Christ, or ...?

b) Secondly, Paul develops a thought first stated in v8b, the idea of 'reward': The Planter or Waterer will each be rewarded according to his own labour: So vv 12-15 speak in building metaphor of reward for work done as a Christian.

We need to be extremely careful not to invent a non-Biblical doctrine of purgatory here.

v15 shows these words refer to Christians, to people who are saved through faith in Christ, and going to heaven.

The word 'fire' does not refer to judgement of *people*, or to hell, but metaphorically to a testing of the materials used in the work Christians are called to do in their lifetime on earth.

Especially in the church, but not only there, our service of Christ is described as building in one of six materials, which fall into two categories.

Leon Morris in his commentary groups the 'gold, silver, precious stones' as 'valuable', and 'wood, hay or straw' as 'worthless'. Since v 13 says the quality of the work will be revealed by fire, however, we should think of the two groups in terms of their flammability: Materials in the former group are lasting, in the latter, temporary.

Not only do gold and silver survive fire, they are *refined* by it, improved by the very thing that tries to destroy them. In fact, tremendous heat and pressure on carbon *produces* diamonds.

Suffering can *strengthen* faith if it's real, or *destroy* it by revealing our faith is in ourselves, not in God and his grace

As I reach the end of my teaching ministry, I have to ask myself, has my preaching produced Christians who can stand under pressure; have I taught God's word so that:

new Christians grow in faith, hope, love and likeness to Christ,

tempted Christians spot the pitfalls and stay out of them,

unemployed Christians find God's will for their energies,

employed Christians work as God-pleasers, not just for man?

Do lonely outsiders find uncomplicated friendship from us,

Do people with questions find answers from us...?

You see, any preaching which merely entertains or even educates, without engaging the listener in spiritual growth, is akin to building with wood, hay or straw; when pressure comes, and come it will, the audience may be dispersed.

In my last year of training, in Carrick Knowe, I was sent to visit the Church Drama group. I was there when the fire safety Officer came to check the stage curtain, which has to protect the audience if there is a fire back stage. I did not hear him ask, 'Have you coated it with flame-retardant*?' or the reply, 'Yes.'

All I saw was him pulling out a cigarette lighter, flicking it on, and holding it to the foot of the curtain for the required number of seconds. My heart was in my mouth as I wondered how I would explain to the minister that his church hall had just been burnt down - by the Fire Brigade! But the treatment had worked. The Curtain survived testing by fire. Nothing less

would do. [*PS Afterwards, a member told me the flame retardant would have been Ammonium Phosphate.*]

Building to last is expensive; but anything less is pointless.
Preaching to last is equally costly,
to the one who prepares, and those who listen;
but anything less is futile.

Apply that, Christian, to your own area of calling. In work, or leisure, or church, are you merely passing the time of day, or are you aware of eternal significance in what you do? If you golf, is it merely for exercise, merely to show you are better at it than others? Or is it because you can have meaningful conversations in your foursome? Pass-time? Or Purposeful?

Fourth metaphor: You are God's temple

In pagan thought, a temple was the place where God lived. Jews knew (but did not always remember) that God does not live in houses made with hands.

When God the Father gave his Holy Spirit to live in those who believe in Christ, believing human beings became in reality what built temples never really were: a place where God lives

Have we all invited Christ to come into our lives as Lord? Given him complete control of our wills? Have we matured, spiritually? Pray in the Spirit! Resist temptation in Christ!

What spiritual growth have you seen in yourself this week?

Or year? Or 15 years? If you can, please tell me. If you can't see any, what can you and I do about it in these last 10 days?