

428 The sweet fragrance of Christ

The Corinthian Christians were a “mixed bag” due to their varied backgrounds and habits, and they had strange ideas as to what Christian faith and behaviour were to mean in daily life. So in his letters to this young Christian community, as indeed to all the other such communities he also cared for, Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, interweaves the basic doctrines of the Christian Faith with the practical consequences arising from those doctrines in terms of day-by-day Christian conduct.

In this Reflection we use some words from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians (Chapter 2.14-16) as a timely reminder for us in these Christ-ignoring times. This is a passage where a Literal translation is especially useful in bringing out some of the nuances within the Greek words originally used by Paul when writing his letter. The passage reads as follows in the J P Green Literal translation:

(1) v.14a - “But thanks be to God, the One always leading us in triumph in Christ ...”. Here is our steady thankfulness to God the Father, for He is the One always “leading us in triumph in Christ”, or, an alternative emphasis of the Greek verb followed in the KJV, “(who) always causeth us to triumph in Christ”. Through thick and thin, Paul always “triumphed” in, and through, and because of, Christ. What an example, and an encouragement for those Corinthians and for us. We know from his other Holy Spirit-inspired letters that Paul “learned to be content” (Philippians 4.11b), and that he urges us to give thanks “in everything” (I Thessalonians 5.18a). Why? Because the “house” of his life and ministry was built on the Christ-Rock, meaning that no metaphorical rain, floods or wind could make him fall (Matthew 7.24-25). So too for us: in Christ, triumph, thankfulness and impregnability are bestowed upon us.

(2) v.14b – “and the One revealing through us the odour of the knowledge of Him in every place”. Now we learn that we are smelly! - that through our simple allegiance to Christ, God the Father is spreading “the smell of” the knowledge of Christ wherever we are or go. Jesus’ words in Matthew 5 on the same theme come to mind, that we are Christ-salt and Christ-lights. It means that we are making a positive difference to the people and places where we are, even without much conscious effort or awareness, because of our Father-honouring, Christ-abiding, Spirit-filled lives. Again, what an encouragement, what a reassurance.

(3) vv.15a – “For we are a sweet smell to God because of Christ ...”. We find from the Concordance that the Greek word for “smell” used here is all about a sweetness, a fragrance, of smell. This sweet fragrance rises from us, like a sacrificial offering, to God the Father because we belong to Christ. What further privilege is granted to us in this! – that not only are our surroundings blessed by our allegiance to Christ, but also Almighty God Himself is blessed by our Christ-filled lives acting as a sweet fragrance for Him. The beauty of that fragrance springs not from our own efforts of course, but rather from the gracious consequences of Christ being at work in us through the Holy Spirit (eg., Ephesians 2.4-10).

(4) vv.15b-16a - (“a sweet smell to God because of Christ) ... in the ones being saved, and in the ones being lost; to the one an odour of death unto death, and to the other, an odour of life unto life”. Finally we come to these solemn truths where we learn of the different effects of the sweet-smelling fragrance of our Christ-filled lives. In the “ones being saved” (Literal, a present continuous tense – here is mention of the paradox of our being saved already while still being saved; egs., II Timothy 1.9 / Titus 3.5 / Philippians 1.6; 2.12-13), the fragrance is one of “life unto life”. But “in those ones being lost” (Literal, another present continuous tense), the fragrance is “an odour of death unto death”.

We are living among people who, by faith in Christ, are saved, are being saved, and others who are yet to be saved. And we are living also among other people who are on the road towards perishing, by their spurning Christ’s own self-sacrifice to God, when Jesus “gave up Himself on our behalf, an offering and a sacrifice for an odour of a sweet smell to God” (Ephesians 5.2, Literal). That sacrifice of Christ Himself, the Lamb of God, has made possible the twin gifts from God the Father of the forgiveness of sins and the eternal salvation of all Christ-redeemed lives (egs., John 1.29 / Titus 3.5-7 / Revelation 1.5-6).

(5) v.16b – “And who is sufficient for these things?” – who is up to this task of spreading, and of being, “the sweet fragrance of Christ”? In human terms the answer of course is “No-one”, but as we fruitfully “abide in Christ” (John 15.4-7, KJV), praise God, the Christ-fragrance is spread abroad quite naturally, be that through Paul, or those Corinthians, or us.

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