

3rd Advent - 1 Corinthians 4:1-5. 13.12.2015

On the Service of the Returning Lord

¹ So look at Apollos and me as mere servants of Christ who have been put in charge of explaining God's mysteries. ² Now, a person who is put in charge as a manager must be faithful. ³ As for me, it matters very little how I might be evaluated by you or by any human authority. I don't even trust my own judgment on this point. ⁴ My conscience is clear, but that doesn't prove I'm right. It is the Lord himself who will examine me and decide.

⁵ So don't make judgments about anyone ahead of time – before the Lord returns. For he will bring our darkest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives. Then God will give to each one whatever praise is due. [NLT]

When you walk down the aisles of a Christian bookstore, you see not only various topics of literature, but often also quite a big section dedicated to a specific author. There is nothing wrong with Christian authors and musicians being well-known as they use the talents God has given them.

Christian speakers may fill large stadiums with people - and again, there is nothing wrong with that, as they use the talent God has given them to spread the message (after all the first Christian gathering had a large crowd listening of whom 3.000 were baptised!)

There is nothing wrong if those who preach, teach or make music to carry the message of Christ to a world in need become well-known by doing so. The important thing to remember in all of this, however, is that we are to do so

in the Service of the Returning Lord

The danger Paul warns about here, however, is that it can so easily be more about the people than about Jesus. After all, Christian literature and music have become big business - and often it's all about the name-recognition, because that is what sells. The problem may arise, when people **only** read these books, only follow their teachers - and no longer read from the Book of books - no longer hear the Words which alone bring life.

The thing is - just as in the early church - when people start being put in the

centre, there may be serious divisions in the church. That is precisely what had happened in the church at Corinth: there were different factions - one group favoured Paul, the other favoured Apollos, yet another claimed Peter as their 'special teacher', while a fourth group was the Christ-group.

We see the results today of putting people and their teachings at the centre. The one, holy Christian Church has been split into many different Christian groupings - and over and over we see that these groups often only came about because the leaders of a congregation were unable to work together. It was all about the people - their different spiritual gifts were highlighted, and instead of serving to complement each other, they drove a wedge into the unity!

It was to counter these divisions within the congregation at Corinth that Paul wrote this letter. His concern was to show very clearly that in the church of the Lord it is not who preaches the Word that was important. In the church there are no 'stars' - even if some do have a better preaching or writing style than others; even if some have a wonderful talent for writing lyrics and music. Whatever is done, is to be done in the service of our Lord.

There is no hierarchy, no one greater or lesser: Apostles, evangelists, pastors - they are only servants. No more - but also no less than that. Called to serve the Lord, as they serve his people.

It is never a reason to join a church or congregation because the pastor is so 'wonderful'. It is not the servants who are important, but he, who has sent them, and who entrusted them with their task of preaching, teaching and guiding the flock. It is this Lord we are to follow. Not Paul, not Apollos, not Peter, not Luther - not any of the pastors of our time.

Leadership in the church does not focus on the individual pastor or teacher, but it is about the call to lead people to the Lord. We lead by following the call of the Shepherd Jesus Christ. We lead by serving, because it is not the pastors who are important - but the message they proclaim is.

Why does Paul lay so much emphasis on this matter? Why is he so firm on

this point? When those who preach, who write or make music always get to hear how great they are, they may start believing it! Suddenly it's about that person - about how many came to listen to them; about how many books or CDs they sell. Of course they still speak about Jesus - but he is not at the centre any more.

Above all servants must be faithful - that is what we expect of those who work for us. They must carry out our commands - it is not up to them to decide what they would prefer to do, or what their fellow workers think they should be doing. They are entrusted with taking care of their masters interests; of carrying out his commands.

The same applies to the servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are to be faithful to his 'interests'; they are to carry out his commands. These 'interests' and his command have to do with the saving of people: with preaching and teaching the Word.

You may expect of a pastor to be faithful - to his calling! Faithful to the Lord and his message. Having the courage to speak out - to name those things which need to be changed - is not always easy. But for us, as we look forward to the return of the Lord, this is of great importance. It is not about hearing what we would like - but sometimes to hear those things which don't sit so comfortably!

Pastors are to be faithful - as was the forerunner of the Lord, John the Baptist, who was imprisoned for telling Herod what he did not want to hear. Faithful like Martin Luther, and many with him, who did not put the authority of the church and the pope above the authority of the Lord. Faithful like many in our century, who preached the Word of their Lord - even though the law forbade it.

Saying what needs to be said - but at the same time pointing to the wonderful grace of our Lord. We are to speak of how God does the unthinkable, by becoming human, and dying in our place - so that we may be free of the crushing weight of our guilt and sin.

That after all is what Advent wants to remind us of - it is not about a

Christmas filled with gifts - but about receiving the One gift: Jesus Christ, Son of God, and son of Mary, come to save a lost world.

That is why the pastor may not be the centre of attention. That is why authors, Christian speakers and musicians must not be in the lime-light. That is the place reserved for Jesus and for what he has done for us. Our call is simply to point to him - to allow his Word to speak through us.