

Sermon for 8th February 2026, Epiphany 5

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

I Corinthians 2:1-12[13-end]; Matthew 5:13-20

Sermon

How many of us Christians feel like we truly are the light of the world? How many of us would be comfortable being placed on a lampstand for all to see and be attracted by? I'm pretty sure we much prefer Jesus' other suggestion that when we give to the needy, we should not let our left hand know what our right hand is doing – a passage that comes only 30 verses later in Matthew's gospel.

But how do we reconcile these two sayings of Jesus? Why does Jesus want us to 'shine before others' in one passage, and then almost immediately tell us to conceal our good works when we give to charity?

You might have faced this dilemma if you've ever given to someone's birthday charity or sponsorship drive on Facebook. There's often a button to click to tell the world that 'I've supported my friend's charity with x amount' – and another button to not only hide the amount, but also to hide my name entirely.

Usually when this kind of apparent contradiction appears in a gospel – 'show your goodness' & 'hide your goodness' – I like to ask myself if there's some kind of underlying principle that can help both make sense at the same time.

Paul offers us such a principle in his letter to the Corinthians. At the time, he was dealing with the rise of factions in the Corinthian church, each of which were starting to declare that only their faction was doing Christianity correctly and the others had definitely got it wrong and needed to repent.

Each faction in Paul's day might well have been expecting Paul to make a clear decision as to which group had got it right. But Paul doesn't side with any of

them. This is helpful because it means we're not able to smugly declare that of course we would have been on the correct side, but we're forced to consider how Paul tries to bring reconciliation to a feuding community instead – a far more universal and ever-present concern.

The problem Paul sees is that the church in Corinth has misunderstood or forgotten what it means to be a follower of Christ. They seem to be relating to each other on an assumption that we have to earn our place in the community by first acting correctly and believing correctly. 'If you don't say, do or believe the right things, how can we be in community together?'

But Paul argues that this is missing the point. So what he does is shift the focus of the community away from themselves and towards the God who undergirds the faith of everyone in the Church, regardless of what faction they belong to.

He tells the Corinthians that they've fallen into the trap of thinking the Christian faith is all about believing the right teaching – as taught and learned through human wisdom – something the Greeks of Corinth were famous for. They had come to perceive their connection to God as a matter of working really hard to faithfully imitate the teachings and example of Jesus Christ.

But Tess, I hear you say, surely the Christian faith is *precisely* about imitating the teachings and example of Jesus Christ? Why else are we here?

Great question! What I believe Paul is trying to say in this letter is that faith is not about imitating Christ's *outward behaviour* – reading about what he does and trying to copy it – but about participating in Christ, sharing in Christ's own relationship with the Father – what Paul calls 'having the mind of Christ', and what Jesus himself calls being a friend of God, or even an adopted child of God, and not just a servant following rules and instructions.

The difference is radical and profound and can totally change our lives if we experience it even for a moment.

Imagine you'd become a nun because you wanted to be holy and the best way to do that seemed to be to copy what the nuns were doing. They're walking gracefully, so I'll walk gracefully. They make profound bows at the altar, so I'll make profound bows at the altar. They read holy books and sing plainchant and follow all the rules no matter how trivial, so I'll read holy books and sing plainchant and follow all the rules. They wear a habit and veil, so I'll wear a habit and veil. They call themselves after holy saints, so I'll do the same. And sure enough, after a while, from the outside no one can tell the difference. If it walks like a nun and sings like a nun, it's probably a nun. And when I was a novice nun, I rather enjoyed people thinking I was holy. But then occasionally a visitor would come into the cloister, and they'd chat with me over coffee and cake and more often than not would eventually say something along the lines of "Oh, I thought you were so holy but you're just *normal*", and I'd laugh with relief because I didn't have to keep up the act anymore.

But having the *mind* of Christ is totally different to trying to pretend to be like him. Our faith is much less about what we're *doing*, and much more about the *spirit* in which we're doing it.

For example, if someone gives you a gift, it might be because they want to look like a good person, or it might be because the Spirit of God is acting in them and that's just what the Spirit of God wants to do. Same act, totally different motivation. Similarly, when I bow at the altar, I could be doing it because the Spirit of Christ in me is humbled and awed at the presence of our almighty creator God, or it might be because I want to look holy and important as your priest. It's not easy to tell the difference.

So what Paul is trying to tell the Corinthians is that all this arguing about who has the best wisdom or the right answers, is futile. We can't argue our way into loving each other. If we try, it will only ever be a fake copy of the real thing.

God's love is not found in a set of behavioural rules, but is a completely different way of experiencing the world.

Those with the mind of Christ don't worry about wisdom and arguments and being right, they simply see the Spirit of God in everyone they meet, and in all of creation – they can't help it.

They are the light of the world. They don't *try* to be the light, or imitate the light, and they certainly don't argue with each other about who has correctly recognised the light and who hasn't. They *are* the light. And this light cannot be placed under a bushel basket. It cannot be hidden.

This is why Jesus can say on the one hand that those who are the light should not hide their goodness (because they're at no risk of pride), but that those who give to the needy because it makes them look good should instead learn humility by doing it without letting anyone know.

I really want to finish my sermon there, but I know (and even hope) someone will say to me afterwards, 'but Tess, how do we get the mind of Christ? How do we move from someone who is just behaving well, to someone who truly embodies the Spirit of God?' I know of only one answer: prayer. Ask God over and over – if you truly desire this. Sit in silence with God and listen. Then ask again. The mystics dedicated their entire lives to seeking to become God's deepest friends and lovers, because as Paul put it, "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him".