

### 3:1 JARS OF CLAY

**We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.**

*2 Corinthians 4:7*

**Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?**

*1 Corinthians 6:19 NRSV*

It is quite extraordinary, when you think about it, that our human bodies should carry around the Spirit of God.

There were two everyday features of a city like Paul's Corinth. One was the market with its stalls of earthenware pottery, ranging from huge containers for wine or corn, to small oil lamps which every home possessed by the dozen. The other sight you couldn't miss was the many temples to this or that god scattered about the city.

The point of an oil lamp was the light flickering from its spout, fed by the oil in its tiny reservoir. The point of a temple was the actual presence of the divine being who lived there. Lamps were easily smashed; temples were prone to earthquakes and accidental fires. Paul's point is that though our bodies are mortal and fragile and (in their present form) temporary, they carry the treasure of Christ who is the light of the world, they are portable homes for God himself.

Christians are expendable but precious. Whether we are impressive or ordinary-looking, healthy or infirm, the Lord loves us and values us, not just for 'the spiritual bit' but for the whole of us. Without the earthenware vessel there could be no light in dark places; without the roof, columns and walls there could be no indwelling majesty.

*Lord, thank you for the incredible privilege of carrying you around in my ordinary life. Help me to look after my body for however long it is given me. Deal with anything that makes your light shine less brightly, or compromises the holiness of your temple.*

### 3:2 PLEASING HIM

**Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.**

*Ephesians 4:30*

**I always do what pleases him.**

*John 8:29*

'Put a smile on my face!' The manager knew exactly how his failing team could win. If only they would do what he told them and not pursue their own ego-trips in impressive but fruitless solo episodes. He wasn't pleased with them, how could he be? But how simple it would be for them to put that delighted grin back on his face.

It's not as if the Lord is hard to please, or always nit-picking, like a disapproving maiden aunt glaring at a speck of mud on our shoes when we come in from the garden. He loves it whenever we turn to him in prayer, breathe a heartfelt 'sorry' or 'thank you', or look to him for inspiration at a difficult moment.

Jesus' relationship with his Father was maintained, not by automatically locking on to Divine mission control, but by conscious and deliberate prayer and meditation, seeking that inner conviction of what would bring his Father the greatest joy. This sometimes meant a life-or-death struggle, as in Gethsemane.

We may not be special saints or have time for extended seasons of prayer, but we may be failing to make use of the double endowment we have been given: the Spirit of Jesus and the promises of God. Jesus' presence in our lives, and the sure prospect of final victory.

This will affect the way I think about the day ahead, the people I'm going to meet, the times I won't be able to do my own thing, my ability to respond to opportunities or challenges that come at zero notice. Am I fully in touch with the manager's strategy and tactics?

*Lord, teach me how to practise your presence more thoroughly than I do. Show me how to give you delight today. One day I will see you face to face, in the fullness of joy. Help me to train for that moment.*

### 3:3 OASES OF THE SPIRIT

**Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.**

*Ezekiel 47:12*

**‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.’ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.**

*John 7:37-39*

Oases aren’t mirages. They really are places in the desert where travellers and their flocks or herds can find fresh water, delicious fruit, shade and shelter. They are fed from underground aquifers, often originating thousands of miles away.

Christians are walking oases. Their lives are or should be full of ‘fruit’, offering refreshment and inner strength to other travellers. This happens because they are ‘in the Lord’. They are like date palms and pools of clear water nourished by the ever-present, never-failing Lord Jesus Christ, our ‘sanctuary’ and source of spiritual life.

When Jesus says, in one of the key passages about the Holy Spirit in John’s Gospel, that ‘anyone’ can have this water if they would come trustingly to him, not only is he offering himself as God’s oasis for a thirsty world, he means you don’t have to be a special saint for your life to offer ‘food’ and ‘healing’ to those around you. ‘Whoever’ you are, the Spirit can flow into you and out of you like a river.

I have found this to be true when meeting other Christians. They have helped me innumerable times with their friendship, sense of humour and practical encouragement. They would be embarrassed if I told them how lost and parched I would be without them.

*The Spirit is given to me entirely free, no water rates to pay, no conditions attached. I long to be able to offer at least a cup of cold water to others in the name of Christ (Mark 9:41). May I not be a deceptive mirage or a muddy pool for someone I meet today.*

### 3:4 RECEIVING AND TRANSMITTING

**Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard?**

*Galatians 3:2*

**Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.**

*Romans 10:17*

In his remarkable book *The Cretan Runner*, George Psychoundakis tells how he helped the Allies in the White Mountains of Crete during the Second World War, by carrying vital radio equipment to the caves where the partisans were holding out in the difficult conditions of the German occupation. Agents could be picked up and supplies dropped at key points. News of Allied successes, however few, kept the spirit of hope alive and the scattered bands united. Radios were essential receivers and transmitters.

Paul insists that the good news of Christ isn’t a matter of observing the moral and ritual law found in the Scriptures. We’ve been trying to do that for centuries and have failed miserably. Our only hope is to listen to how Christ fulfilled the law on our behalf, dying for us, and to receive his Spirit by believing in him.

This message needs carrying from person to person, if necessary across the mountains and torrents of a world’s disbelief. Each one of us needs to be both a receiver and a transmitter, as Paul explains to the Romans. We receive the word to rekindle our own faith, and we pass it on faithfully to others. Meanwhile the Spirit energises us and applies the word to bring life-giving faith in Christ.

It is not a matter of spectacular displays, impressive oratory or dramatic revelations. George calls it the ‘Cretan Wireless’: ‘Anything that happens is blown at once through all Crete from mouth to mouth on the very same day.’ In the early days of the Church ‘those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went’ (Acts 8:4). This is God’s superfast broadband (in more modern terms). Is your area getting it loud and clear?

*I am so grateful for the ‘gathered’ church where I can hear your word and regenerate my faith. Please show me how I can play my part in the ‘scattered’ church which takes that same word everywhere we go.*

### 3:5 UNBELIEF

**When the Advocate comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because people do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father; and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.**

*John 16:7-8*

**The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.**

*2 Corinthians 4:4*

Propaganda is spreading ideas you want people to accept, whether they are true or false. If people accept true ideas, they see more clearly; but if the ideas they take on board are ‘fake news’, they can end up thoroughly confused and misled. If the propaganda is about politics, it may affect the temporary outcome of an election or a referendum; but if the issues are eternal life and death, right and wrong, and who Jesus is and what he came to do, the ultimate destiny of millions of people is at stake.

Paul was convinced that the ‘propaganda’ he was spreading, the good news that Christ had come to save the world, was true; equally, he was convinced that there was another agency at work spreading fake news: that sin and unbelief are fine and that Jesus and God and all that stuff don’t need to be taken seriously.

How then can people be brought to see the truth? If it were just an intellectual debate, fine words and clever arguments might win the day; but since it is actually a spiritual conflict in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12), it requires spiritual weaponry. This Jesus promises will be available from his Father in the form of the Spirit of truth, who opens blind eyes and shuttered hearts to see Jesus as he is (2 Corinthians 4:6).

*Elisha prayed: ‘Open the young man’s eyes, Lord, so that he may see’ (2 Kings 6:17). Teach me how I can be available to the Spirit in his truth-spreading and eye-opening work among those I meet today.*

### 3:6 A SPIRITUAL HOUSE

**In Christ Jesus the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.**

*Ephesians 2:21-22*

**As you come to him, the living Stone, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.**

*1 Peter 2:4-5*

Peter and Paul had their differences; but on one thing they were both agreed, which was that the church of Jesus Christ was made up of Jews and non-Jews together. It wasn’t a physical building, it was ‘spiritual’: wherever in the world people met in the name of Jesus Christ, the living God was dwelling among them by his Holy Spirit.

During the global coronavirus lockdown, churches, schools and gatherings of all kinds were banned from meeting normally; instead, they had to meet ‘virtually’. This wasn’t an imaginary event – people really did interact through the internet; worship happened, teaching was done, committees deliberated, business was transacted. It didn’t depend on physical togetherness under the same roof.

It wasn’t ideal, and once it was over people got back together with a sigh of relief. But lessons had been learnt. You could ‘be with’ someone without being in their bodily presence. This has been true of the Christian Church ever since Pentecost. God’s Spirit has been among the followers of Jesus, not as a substitute for God but as his real self. It is as though all over the world Jesus is saying, ‘Here am I, and the children God has given me’ (Hebrews 2:13).

Jesus acts as an essential Cornerstone: by coming to him, which we do in faith and trust, we join with other believers and become church. One day this ‘building’ will be complete. It’s still in process, and there are bound to be untidy features, but they aren’t for ever.

*If I am sometimes puzzled by the ordinariness of what I know as ‘church’, may I remember what is really going on. God has already started to live among his children. Lockdown won’t be for ever.*