**Lent Course 2024**

*1 Clement: Living Together*

**Introduction to course**

Welcome to our Lent Course for 2024! As I’ve said on Sundays, we’re going to be doing something a little different this year, with a series of sessions on the Early Church. I spent 4-5 years studying the Early Church as a Masters and then as a Doctoral student, and I wanted to share some of what I learned during that time with you.

The course, I hope, will not be ‘academic’, in the sense of being totally unrelated to our lives today, nor will I assume any knowledge whatsoever – and if at any point I do, please feel free to interrupt to ask me to explain further. My aim for the course is that we would learn much for our life as a church today, by seeing how the Gospel impacted communities of people in the first centuries after the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. And we’ll do this by getting to know 5 individuals from across the range of early church history, beginning today in the late 1st century, and concluding in 5 weeks’ time in the early 5th century.

So each week, there’ll be a mixture of me teaching from the front, and opportunities to think things through and how they might apply to us today in small groups, and at the end a chance to ask questions. [Of course, if your preference is just to sit and think by yourself, that’s absolutely fine, don’t feel any pressure to talk to others if you don’t want to.] Today I want to give a bit more of an introduction to studying church history, and to the early church, so we’ll spend a little bit less time with our friend for today, Clement.

So to begin with, I want to think a little bit about church history more generally. Some of you may be wondering what the point even is of looking at early church history. Unless you’re interested in history and that sort of thing (like I am!), what relevance do the lives of people who lived nearly 2000 years ago have for us today? Does any of this really matter?

So, turn to someone near you, and just a for a few minutes have a chat about what you think. Is there any value in studying Christian figures of the past? And if so, what?

*Discussion*.

For me, there are two reasons why it’s so important to study Christian figures of the past, as Christians today. First, the lives of individual Christians throughout history can be a great source of encouragement. To be sure, no Christian is perfect, and we should not idolise them; but nonetheless the strength of their faith, their zeal for the Gospel, their love for others can be a wonderful testimony to the work of God’s grace in an individual’s life, and a spur to us to follow in their footsteps. I’ve put down there a verse from Hebrews: the writer has just gone through a whole list of Old Testament figures who demonstrated great faith in their lives, and concludes: Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. The past saints are likened to those who have already run the same race we are now running, and are lining the way cheering us on towards our goal.

Secondly, looking at the teaching of past Christian figures can be useful as a way of correcting and improving our own thoughts and ideas. Living in a different time and place, they were therefore asking different questions and providing different answers. C.S. Lewis I think puts this point really well, and I’ve put a quote down on the handout. So, in short, C.S. Lewis is saying that the past can act as a useful corrective for the present. By entering into conversation with people from the past, we gain a broader perspective, our blind-spots and errors get highlighted, and we can learn new insights.

And I think this is especially true of the very first centuries of church history. Because here we see the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the message of his death and resurrection, taking root in a culture that was very unlike our own. Our culture, our society today may have moved away from Christian faith, but the values that govern our society, the values we all take for granted, are still largely values that derive from the Christian Gospel, values of equality, human rights and so on. (There’s certainly nothing about secular materialism that logically gives rise to these values). The ancient Greco-Roman world in which the church first became established was, by contrast, a very different culture. As Christians lived lives transformed by the Gospel, they stood out as different – for some that was attractive, for others it was deeply unsettling, so much so, as we’ll see, that they sought to remove Christians entirely from their communities. The challenge for us as a church today, as our society increasingly moves away from its Christian foundations, the challenge for us is to have the courage to live distinctive lives shaped by the Gospel, lives some will find attractive, others will find unsettling.

**Introduction to the early church**

So, what was life like for the Early Church? What are we talking about when we refer to the Early Church? Before we get into Clement, as I said I want to give a very broad brush overview of the history of the Early Church to help orient us before we look at these 5 individuals over the next 5 weeks.

There are two key moments to keep in mind for framing the history of the Early Church. The first, of course, is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in around 30 AD. That’s when Christianity begins, and you have people like the Apostle Paul in the decades that follow taking the Christian message to many cities across the Roman Empire. There are traditions that other apostles went to other places, such as Mark to Egypt and Thomas as far as India.

The second key moment was what is known as the Edict of Milan, in 313 AD. This Edict under the Emperor Constantine, granted freedom of worship to Christians, ending centuries of local and state-authorised persecution. In the years that followed Constantine increasingly favoured Christianity, adopted the faith himself and in 325 summoned the first universal Council of the Church, near his royal palace at Nicaea – something that would have been unthinkable for any previous Roman Emperor.

Constantine is a pivot point in the history of the Church. Before Constantine – and this is where our first three sessions will be located – Christianity was an often persecuted minority. Suddenly with Constantine, it became the favoured religion of the state. Christianity became much more comfortable, and more attractive to those seeking to advance their political careers – and our last two sessions will be set in this period.

It’s astonishing to think how we even got to this point, how we got from a man being crucified, to a religion adopted more or less as the state religion by the Roman Empire. Not least because, right up until the Edict of Milan, Christians were at times fiercely persecuted, with major statewide crackdowns in the middle of the third century and just before Constantine. At many times in these early centuries, becoming a Christian meant quite possibly social ostracization, if not torture and execution, as we’ll see next week. And yet, all the time, the church continued to grow, a steady stream of people joined them. Why?

I’m hoping we’ll see something of the answer to this question in the coming weeks. But in short, the answer – at least in human terms – seems to be simply because of the distinctive lives often lived by the Christians. After the apostles, there was little to no evangelism in the strict sense of the word, no missionaries travelling from city to city seeking to convert people to the faith. There was no direct attempt to get people to join the new movement. But it grew as onlookers came into contact with Christians and saw the very different lives they lived. Next week, we’ll see how their response to persecution and fearlessness in the face of death was deeply shocking and challenging to many ordinary Romans. As Christian communities overturned cultural hierarchies, they were marked by an unusually deep love and care for one another. As a result, not surprisingly slaves and women seemed to have been particularly prominent among the early converts, seeing a community where they were treated as equals. And when crisis struck, such as the plague, pagans who had the means to fled to the hills, while it was the Christians who stayed behind to care for the sick, putting their own lives at risk to tend to plague victims. In short the Christians, transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, lived lives completely counter to so many of the norms and expectations of Roman society – in a way that some found compelling, and others found repulsive.

So that’s something of a brief overview of the period we’ll be working our way through over the coming weeks. Before we continue, let’s pause and turn to a neighbour: In what ways do we see the church today, nationally or locally, failing to live the counter-cultural life we are called to in Christ?

*Discussion*.

**1 Clement Introduction**

So, I painted quite a rosy picture of the early church living this radically distinctive life. And in many ways I believe it was indeed something quite distinctive in the social world of the Roman Empire, that made outsiders sit up and think what’s going on with the Christians. As in every age, though, such holy aspirations to a radical way of life, particularly one of selfless love, borne out of the self-giving love of Christ, is not always well reflected in communities of still fallen people. And this brings us to Clement, and his first letter, known as 1 Clement. (There is a 2 Clement, a second letter, but we think it was unlikely to be by the same person, and also not a letter, but possibly the earliest surviving sermon).

1 Clement is one of the earliest surviving Christian documents outside of the New Testament – and in fact in some early sources it was even included among the letters of the New Testament. It was likely written in around the 80s or 90s AD, so about 20 or 30 years after the death of Paul, which is referred to in the letter. The letter is today included among what we refer to as the Apostolic Fathers, a collection of the very earliest Christian writings outside of the New Testament. According to later tradition, the letter was written by Clement, the third bishop of Rome (Peter being the first). But it’s not certain that there were bishops at this time, or that there was a bishop called Clement. Other evidence suggests that Clement was a kind of secretary for the church, and so he may have been the one who penned the letter, but that ultimately it was the work of the wider eldership. So of the five people we’ll be looking at, this is the only one who we don’t really know anything about! The letter itself simply says that it is a letter from the Christians of Rome to the Christians of Corinth.

The church in Corinth we know a bit more about in these early decades, because we also have the two letters written to the Corinthians from the apostle Paul – and on several occasions, 1 Clement refers back to them. You may remember that in 1 Corinthians in particular, Paul is distressed to learn that they have formed factions around different teachers, and he urges them to return to unity in Christ.

Sadly, it seems, discord has flared again, and this is the reason for 1 Clement being written. A group of younger men has ‘revolted’, in the words of 1 Clement, and deposed the church leadership, creating division all over again in the Corinthian church. Clement wryly comments that this division is worse than last time, because at least then they were dividing over Apollos and Cephas, respectable, eminent teachers. Now it’s all because of some young whipper-snappers.

News of this situation had reached the Roman Christians, and out of concern for what was happening, decided to write this letter in response to restore peace in Corinth. Some see the letter as a sign of the already-growing authority of Rome; but the tone of the letter is one of persuasion, not commanding from a place of authority. For me, it’s rather a sign simply of the concern that Christians show for one another: when we see someone else going astray, we don’t consider it nothing to do with us, but where appropriate we gently seek to lead them back to the right way. The letter pleads with the Corinthians, appealing to Scripture and the truths of the Gospel, to return to unity and godly love.

**1 Clement Key Themes**

So the bulk of the letter – and it is quite a long letter, about twice the length of Romans – the bulk of the letter is an appeal for harmony and unity. Frustratingly, Clement gives us few details of what’s actually happened in Corinth, but in his view the root of the problem is the sin of jealousy and covetousness. The instigators of the rebellion have followed in the pattern of Cain, who was driven by jealousy to murder his brother Abel. Jealous perhaps of those in authority, maybe thinking they knew better, they’d caused bitter divisions in the church by setting themselves up as leaders instead.

Jealousy, envy, covetousness so often are the cause of discord and disunity, as we see other people primarily as those who have what we don’t have. It might be a position of authority, as seems to be the case here; but it could also be particular gifts or particularly blessings you wished you had. We look at others in the church and wish we had the gifts they had, perhaps the gifts for prayer or music or whatever it might be. Or we see the relationships, or the family life, or the wealth or the status that others have, and long to have some of that for ourselves. And the danger when we start thinking in these ways is that we see the other person not as a brother or sister in Christ, as a joint recipient with us of salvation through the Cross, but either as a means to an end, to get from them what we want for ourselves, or a threat to our own view of ourselves. And perhaps we discredit them in our minds, we look for them to fail. And in this way jealousy has caused a division between me and my brother or sister.

So the letter is a response to the perceived sin of jealousy and envy, and a plea to return to unity and godly love. We’re going to pause again, and I’d like you in small groups to take a look at the excerpts on the handout and consider the question: what are Clement’s solutions to the problems in Corinth, how does he persuade them to change?

*Discussion*

The solution for Clement is threefold. First, it’s to have the **humility to recognise our sin**. Humility is a major theme of the letter, and humility characterises how Clement himself expresses himself. He doesn’t have a holier-than-thou attitude in dealing with the Corinthians. *We write these things, dear friends, not only to admonish you, but also to remind ourselves. For we are in the same arena, and the same contest awaits us.* (7.1). He knows that he is no better – he is subject to the same temptations as they are, and we all need to daily remind ourselves of the ways of Christ before such destructive patterns of thought can get out of hand. That’s why we begin each worship service with a time of confession, a time to honestly acknowledge before God the ways in which through weakness, through negligence and through our own deliberate fault we have fallen short in our lives. It’s an opportunity to reset our lives and our relationship with him. In politics, ‘sorry’ can be the hardest word to say – so often the instinct is instead for defensiveness, justifying ourselves in our own sight. Or even in church, we can hear a sermon on, say, humility, and think ‘oh yes that person over there really needs to hear this,’ without thinking about whether this is a lesson for ourselves. And yet the Christian way is to have the humility to be self-reflective and honest about our mistakes.

And we can be honest, because God is a God of second (indeed third, fourth, seventy-seventh) chances. *Let us fix our eyes on the blood of Christ and understand how precious it is to his Father, because, being poured out for our salvation, it won for the whole world the grace of repentance* (7.4)*.* Because of Jesus’ death for sinners, all have the freedom to acknowledge their faults to God and be given another chance, be given the grace of repentance, of starting anew. This means we don’t get entrenched in our positions, we don’t need to seek to justify ourselves, for we’re justified by the grace of God in Christ (32.4). We’re free to back down and seek the good of the other.

Which brings us to the second solution, to recognise that **disunity is incompatible with the Gospel**. In the Gospel God has brought us together as one body in Christ: *Why do we tear and rip apart the members of Christ, and rebel against our own body, and reach such a level of insanity that we forget that we are members of one another?* (46.7). Quarrelling with another Christian, Clement says, picking up the imagery of the body used by Paul, is akin to ‘rebelling against our own body’, picking a fight with our hand or leg. We belong intrinsically to one another, so why do we fight? It only causes harm to other members of our body. I always find it challenging whenever I find another Christian annoying, or when they’ve been hurtful to me, it’s always challenging to think that I and that other Christian belong to each other.

We belong to one another, because in the Gospel we all alike are recipients of the sacrificial love of Christ: *Because of the love that he has for us, Jesus Christ our Lord, in accordance with God’s will, gave his blood for us, and his flesh for our flesh, and his life for our life* (49.6)*.* This was the love we have been shown, and so it is incomprehensible for us to live without such love for one another. *The height to which love leads is indescribable. Love unites us with God.* (49.4-5) Not to live in love with each other is to deny the very basis of our faith, and to sully our witness before a watching world.

Which leads to the third solution, which very simply is **obedience to this Christ**. He is the one, the Gospel proclaims, who has brought us salvation: Jesus Christ is *the high priest of our offerings, the benefactor and helper of our weakness. Through him we look steadily into the heights of heaven; through him we see as in a mirror his faultless and transcendent face; through him the eyes of our hearts have been opened; through him our foolish and darkened mind springs up into light; through him the Master has willed that we should taste immortal knowledge, for he, being the radiance of his majesty, is as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent.* (36.1-2) And so recognising all that he has done for us, recognising his authority as the Son of God, and that nothing escapes the notice of God, our response can only be simply to obey, to obey his commands to live in humility and love. Clement compares Christians to soldiers, who immediately and without question obey the commands of their superior officers*.* (37.1) So we, too, need to obey the faultless commands of Christ our loving Lord and Saviour.

**Conclusion**

So for Clement, the Gospel transforms how we live in community. A Christian community that is marked by division and jealousy is an oxymoron. For the Gospel enables us to have the humility to recognise our sin, to come before God and one another in humility. The Gospel proclaims the sacrificial love of Christ, and so it is simply incomprehensible not to live lives of sacrificial love ourselves. And the Gospel proclaims Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and so those who have received his salvation can but live as his obedient soldiers.

The Corinthian church seemed repeatedly to fail to live out the Gospel life, and they kept needing to be called back to the way of Christ. No church ever does perfectly live out the Gospel life. But even having this as an ideal to aim towards, marked the Christians out as distinctive from wider society. And very often Christian communities were marked by a radical love for one another that crossed social divisions and hierarchies, and this, while unsettling for some (particularly those who wanted to maintain those hierarchies and divisions), this radical community life was deeply attractive to others. Indeed , the reason why the Roman Church wrote their letter to the Corinthians was because of the damage being done to the Gospel witness in Corinth. For when communities live out the Gospel, men and women are drawn to faith and Christ is honoured and glorified. May that be so also among us.

Discuss q’s for 5 mins, then I’ll take any questions.

**Questions for discussion**

What lessons do you take away from 1 Clement?

Why do you think jealousy and covetousness are so insidious?

How could we at St Andrew’s live a life more shaped by the Gospel?

Even more than us learning to live lives shaped by the Gospel, for Clement the ultimate solution is for God to work transformation in us. He ends his letter with a long prayer, and let me pray part of it for us now. 59.3-4