

This feels like Lent before Lent - a stern warning to behave ourselves or else! But remember it's all said in the light of the Beatitudes which are a blessing which can bring happiness too.

Many years ago I found myself as a very weak swimmer called on to teach swimming and it taught me several things - firstly, that you can get away with teaching something you are not good at for a time but eventually you'll be found out - not least by oneself, by the strain it puts on you trying to be something you are not. I wonder whether Paul doesn't have something of this in mind when he seeks to disabuse the Corinthians of any sense that they've already arrived, that their knowledge of Christ has already saved them, that they know the mind of God while their behaviour talks otherwise, as he will say later

*I had to talk to you as people still living by your natural inclinations . . . and by merely human principles*

They thought they knew all about teaching others to swim, they'd read the books, but were unable to swim themselves, full of wrangling and jealousy towards one another. And so they needed as did I a life-saving course which taught me how to swim properly and not only to save the lives of others but of myself.

The second thing I learned was that to correct a stroke one has sometimes to overcorrect, to exaggerate the movement of one limb in front crawl, for example, to get a more even balance. And perhaps something of this is going on here too in both Paul's letter and in the Gospel passage. You may think you are now one up on your fellow Jews and can dispense with the Law relying on your new freedom in the Spirit but this is the Spirit that has always been at work calling and enabling all people to know the mind of God and reveal this by living a life of virtue. The commandments still stand and indeed I am going to correct your weak limb, your lacking in virtue, by over-emphasising what true virtue is .

A third thing I learned was that you cannot learn to swim without getting wet. It's no good standing around on the edge of the pool thinking about it, you've got to take the plunge if you are to ever discover that the water will support you and warm you as well, as you get into the swing of it, but it's a plunge we have to take over and over again. And so we have to hear Ben Sira admonishing the Israelites, and Paul the Corinthians and Jesus his fellow Jews until it becomes second nature, not our nature first but that of the Spirit doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves including that first plunge and the next and the next and the next. And finding great joy too.

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