

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: May 9th: 2 Corinthians 8: 16-24

This section is, of course, about money and how to use it; but it is also about teamwork, accountability, dependability, credibility. Does it set the bar too high: we can't accept the Gospel from someone who doesn't strictly live the Gospel? There has been a lot of political haggling recently about whether the country's financial affairs can be trusted to a rich man who has never known poverty (and who has a wife who is allegedly even richer). Some theories to challenge: 1) If you haven't experienced it, you can't talk about it; 2) only perfect people can preach. (One of the arguments about the priesthood is the argument that if you have not had a spouse, children and an ordinary job, or at least one of these you are too out of step with your congregation. The counter argument is that the dedicated "outsider" may be a better observer, as well as free to be a full-time priest.)

Paul doesn't name all his team. There has been speculation that one of them is Luke. Indeed the traditional prayer for St Luke's Day assumes that it is Luke: "Luke, whose praise is in the Gospel". Others say the dates don't fit, since Luke wrote his Gospel later.

A little context helps. A great deal was asked of these early missionaries. Poor Titus had hardly time to rest his weary limbs after his previous journey to and from Corinth before he responds *eagerly* to Paul's encouragement to him to go back again. Mission was not for the family man who wanted a comfortable job! ("Apostle" wasn't yet a technical term, so was quite widely used to describe messengers/missionaries.) There were then, as ever since and currently, publicity seeking preachers "on the make". People who liked being in the public eye and were not above turning mission into personal fund-raising. Think tele-evangelist in the negative sense. Billy Graham made a point of NOT cashing in on his celebrity. He refused the offer (from supporters) of a private jet. He set up an independent scrutiny committee to manage his tour costs; and, for example, founding himself having to pay out of his own money when the committee refused to authorise TV as an extra charge in a rather basic hotel room.

There are some useful lessons here. Christian leaders are at their best when they encourage, not impose – contrast Putin? The eager volunteer is more valuable than the pressed man or woman. "Mammon is not toppled by singing choruses, but by signing cheques." "Judge a person by how (s)he earns her/his living, and by how (s)he spends it.