

Sermon for A Chilly Sunday

Sermon for Third Sunday of Epiphany. Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

1 Corinthians 1: 10 – 18

10 I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. 11 My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. 12 What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? 14 I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so no one can say that you were baptized in my name. 16 (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1

Matthew 4

18 As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 19 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will send you out to fish for people.' 20 At once they left their nets and followed him.

21 Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, 22 and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and illness among the people.

The 'Week of Prayer for Christian Unity' is traditionally celebrated on the eight days across the third week of January. Christian communities from across the world and from almost every major denomination take part.

The idea of the 'Week of Prayer for Christian Unity' is to pray that the world wide Church lives up to the prayer of Jesus found in John chapter 17. There we read that at the Last Supper, when Jesus had prayed for his disciples he went on to pray for all who would follow on from them, saying,

'I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.'

The clear intention of Jesus was that his disciples should be one – so that the world might believe their testimony.

The 'Week of Prayer for Christian Unity' was started by an American Episcopalian called Paul Wattson in 1908. Just a year later Wattson became a Roman Catholic. He had come to believe that the only way to achieve unity was for everyone to convert to Roman Catholicism. Thankfully the movement outgrew its founder and by the 1930s expressed the idea that we may hold unity in diversity, elegantly captured in the words of Paul Couturier, a French Roman Catholic, who wrote, "we must pray not that others may be converted to us but that we may all be drawn closer to Christ".

In drawing closer to Jesus we draw closer to each other, each of us recognising that as we all fall short of the perfection of Jesus in different ways, so we may also embody aspects of his perfection in different ways.

Jesus did not pray that we be the same, but rather that we be united. There is a world of difference between unity and uniformity.

Division in the Church is not new, as a read of the letters of the Apostle Paul soon reveals, in 1 Corinthians 1 he writes,

'My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: one of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised in the name of Paul?'

He continues his theme in chapter three, writing,

'What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has

been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow...'

He then gives this stern warning concerning destructive divisions in the Church,

'Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives among you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.'

Did you hear that? We the people of the Church are God's sacred temple.

People are outraged if a church building is vandalised, and yet so often the very same people indulge in destructive criticism of their own brothers and sisters in Christ. If you regard the church building with respect, but do not treat your brothers and sisters in Christ with at least the same respect, then you have not understood what the church building stands for.

We now have heard two clear biblical consequences of destructive divisions within the Church, firstly as Jesus said, the testimony of the Church will not be believed, and secondly, as Paul writes, God will destroy those within the Church who act in destructive and divisive ways.

As we look about the state of the Church in our own country we might well wonder if our not being believed is because we are not one, and if our decline might be God's verdict on our self-destructive divisions?

We have to be able to talk about human sexuality, the ministry of women, the nature of the sacraments, the authority of the Bishop of Rome, and whatever else divides us, not in jumped up self righteousness, but as disciples under the authority of Jesus.

There are Christians who believe the slightest deviation from their understanding of the good news is a blasphemy to be stamped out. Who put you in charge of the truth? The truth is in charge of us. As we all fall short of the truth so we must all be humble.

According to the Nicene Creed we believe in 'one holy catholic and apostolic church', here the word 'catholic' means universal – all who follow the teachings of Jesus are part of the one Church no matter whether they identify themselves as Anglican, Methodist, Episcopalian, Baptist, Roman Catholic, or the Free Reformed Evangelical Catholic Church of KwaZulu Land.

I may have made the last one of those up – but here are some real churches you may not have heard of, the National Baptist Evangelical Life and Soul Saving Assembly of the U.S.A, the Old Time Missionary Baptists, the Fire Baptized Holiness Church of God of the Americas, the Christ Resurrection Gospel Glory Church Nigeria, the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim, and one that I would love to know more about- The Indian Shakers.

What should unite us is the Apostles account of the teachings of Jesus, and of the foundation of the Church. Remember we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. The apostles were the disciples of Jesus commissioned by him to be a loving community telling the good news of the Kingdom to everyone. We are their decedents, we are those whom Jesus prayed for at the Last Supper – that we would be one just as he and the Father are one.

You can find the testimony of the Apostles in the New Testament. Matthew's very Jewish account of the life of Jesus, Mark's characteristically punchy and to the point account, then there is John's fabulously reflective and thoughtful account of Jesus, more theology than history, more poetry than prose, and then of course there is Luke's very human and gentle account, full of stories of those on the edge of first century society – like shepherds and children.

Not forgetting Paul's powerfully argued letters to the first churches, when Paul writes ideas tumble out of his pen and cram up the sentences with metaphors and rhetoric.

These are the people Jesus chose to carry out his mission, all of them different, all of them characters, some of them not that easy to get along with, but rather than write down his message on paper he wrote it on the hearts of his followers, and left us with a colourful mosaic made up of different pieces which when put together tells us the story.

The message is simple...

'As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will send you out to fish for people.' At once they left their nets and followed him.

Hear the call of Jesus on your life, follow him as a disciple united with those who have gone on before us, and with those whom he has called with us now.

Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John, you and me, the Roman Catholics, the Methodists, The Indian Shakers, the Fire Baptized Holiness Church of God of the Americas, we are the disciples of Jesus, he is our Lord, and we should be one.

Amen.