

Unity and Division in Corinth

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Last week we began with all the wonderful things that Paul said about the Church in Corinth. If the epistle to the Corinthians had ended at verse 9, chapter 1, then we would have assumed that Corinth was the perfect Church...

They were enriched in every way
They were waiting for the return of Jesus
They are not lacking in any spiritual gift.

And that would have been a perfectly fine letter
That would have been longer than many letters I have written
And certainly longer than most texts.

But Paul doesn't stop at verse 9
He goes into verse 10
And that is when the waters start getting choppy.

Now before we head to verse 10,
I don't want us to think that verses 1-9 are either empty platitudes, the kind of things that Christians like to say to each other because we like to be nice and polite.

For years in Glasgow presbytery, I was convinced there were only perfect Churches, because you used to get these five yearly, quinquennial visitations, about the congregation, which concluded with the words - the congregation is in good heart; And every time it was suggested that a congregation unite or link with another one, all you heard was about these two perfect congregations which the presbytery was out of sheer jealousy and spite trying to shut down.

Of course those reports were never the truth,
They were the things that Christians love to say
Because we hate to go into honest conflict,
We would much rather have polite sublimated boiling suppressed tension.

But I want to say that those words in verses 1-9, are not like a Glasgow Presbytery Quinquennial Report.
They are deeply true.

And the fact that they are deeply true is something that we are going to come back to at the end of our reflection, as we come to verse 17.

So verse 1-9, deep truths of God's gift
Verse 10 - choppy water.

So what exactly is happening.

Well the story seems to be that a group of people from the Church in Corinth - they are called Chloe's people - which suggests Chloe might have been a wealthy business

persons, possibly a member of the congregation, but certainly her servants and slaves were part of the Corinthian congregation.

When they saw Paul, probably they were tempted not to say anything, didn't want to upset him, but eventually he can tell by the expressions on their faces that there is something that they are hiding from him, and they tell him that there is a lot of quarrelling going on in the Church since Paul has left.

Now it is interesting, they probably told him that there was one group within the Church - who still really loved Paul, were loyal to him, they would say "I am of Paul" - they probably still tried to stick to Paul's ways of trust in the cross and grace and forgiveness and not be held within the Jewish law.

Then there was a group attached to Apollos - he was a very learned and gifted teacher who came to Corinth after Paul. This group were probably attracted to what the Greeks loved to refer to as wisdom, and they had good reason to because there is a lot in the Old Testament about the value of wisdom.

There was a group who were attached to Peter - now it is uncertain whether Peter had ever visited Corinth, but something about Peter must have appealed - perhaps he was more Jewish, perhaps they liked the fact that he had a direct connection to Jesus, perhaps they liked the idea of a the big institutional Church with its headquarters in Jerusalem and weren't quite so keen on this maverick Paul - something about Peter represented stability and authority.

Then there was a group that said they were just attached to Jesus. And it is kind of interesting because if you say that you love Jesus, then surely that is playing the trump card, and no one can argue with you. But there is something in this approach to, perhaps a sense of superiority, that is causing problems.

So Paul here's all this.

And now he has a question... what does he do with this information?

How does he deal with his upset that he hears there are quarrels in Corinth?

I think he was probably tempted to write a letter to the Corinthians that ended at verse 9, or probably with the phrase - "I hear that you are all in good heart"

But he goes into verse 10....

And there are some things worth noticing here...

1. Paul names the conflict as a conflict about personalities, rather than issues - because actually that is what a lot of Church disputes are, they are really about personalities, but we find the issues to shore up our position.
2. The people that Paul names would probably be appalled at the conflict being done in their name. Note that Paul does not even commend his own group, or perhaps easiest of all, doesn't even commend the Jesus group. This is something which is badly wrong.
3. Paul doesn't offer an answer to the immediate problems - he doesn't adjudicate or decide who is right. That must have been tempting.

4. And bear in mind that these were passionate arguments - Paul addresses conflict not with easy words - there are going to be plenty difficult words throughout the situation - Paul addresses conflict by going into conflict. In other words, Paul takes the risk of making things much worse. In fact the evidence later on of 2 Corinthians is that for a while at least, Paul *did* make things much worse.

Although I really like that Paul does this...

1. Because partially solved conflicts are never really solved...

2. And I think that being of one mind is different from agreeing about everything, and forcing an artificial conformity onto the whole group. There is something here about the need for tension in any group, including at this point the tension between the group and Paul himself.

The first thing is that Paul distances himself from the possibility of any personality cult about him - he says he is glad that he didn't baptise any of the Corinthians, oh he did Crispus and Gaius, and then he remembers Stephanos almost as an afterthought. So he potentially upsets his own supporters, but getting rid of any personality cult.

And then he reframes the whole dispute in amongst the presence, death and cross of Jesus Christ.

His first question is in verse 13
"Has Christ been divided?"

This seems to be the implication of what you are doing here, says Paul - the implication is that by separating yourselves, effectively making yourself superior or distant to another group, or being vocal about your greater affinity with another group, you are dividing Christ.

That is the implication here - the minute that you attempt to make yourself superior to any other Christian - and let's be face it, we often feel superior to lots of other Christians, we are actually attempting to tear apart at Jesus himself.

And the second thing is that he brings the cross in, but it is a peculiar way of understanding the cross in verse 7.

He says that he did not come with eloquent power and wisdom
But proclaiming the gospel
So that the cross might not be emptied of its power.

What is going on here?

What do images of eloquence, wisdom, the power of Cross
Have to do with this question of conflict in Corinth?

For Paul, the cross is something that is so utterly scandalous and shameful
That it goes against every standard of status, power, difference, superiority that exists in the world.

He knows that in every Christian heart there is the desire to win a game, there is the ego which wants to come out on top, and there is a striving that we might be the people to get to the top on our own merits, and then we might bask in our own achievements.

And the cross is the opposite of that - it is the giving up of our selves to God. It is the loss of everything that the world wants to value - in this case wisdom, respect, being the best - and instead trusting ourselves to God, including the humiliations that come with that.

What Paul has understood is what is really going on in the dispute in Corinth... He has understood that people have underplayed the mystical holding of Christ which still exists in them now - which is why he asks "Is Christ divided?"

And he understands that in quarrelling there is a desire to get ahead, which profoundly misunderstands the message of Christ which is about giving all up to God, that God might work through us, and that this will often involve profound moments of loss.

So let us think of those two things.

The first - the idea of us all being held in then body, in Jesus Christ, and to quarrel is to attempt to damage Christ himself...

This was something that was profoundly taught by the great German pastor, theologian and ultimately martyr - Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

In the 1930s Bonhoeffer hosted a community of ministerial candidates in Germany - they would eat together, sleep dormitories, work together. This was a profound experience of Christian community.

But he would always emphasise this very important point, that relationship I have with any other individual, sits under the fact that we are in Christ.

He would say, that if I relate to you without Christ, then
I will like you if we have enough in common, or people in common
And I will be distant from you if we have little in common
But if we remember that we are in Christ,
Then we will always be drawn and always relate to one another.

Even if we fall out,
If we discover things about each other that we don't like
If we remember that we are in Christ,
This means we will remain above all.

In Bonhoeffer's group of ordinands, this applied when a very very stark question confronted them
Would they go and fight for the German army
Were they compelled to fight for their country
And some did - some fought on the Eastern front against the Russians
And others like Bonhoeffer himself came to the conclusion that it was his duty to take part in the assassination of Hitler

Can you imagine a greater division between two people

If you thought that Brexit or Scottish Independence were hot bottom issues

Imagine that question - should I fight for the Nazis, and then pain that you felt when a brother in Christ decided that the answer was ye

And yet Bonhoeffer stayed in touch with those students, prayed for them, supported them...

Because he understood that they were in Christ
Not to have done so would have been to divide Christ.

The other principle here is the principle of the Cross.
There is something about joining a group
In that we play a game which is about getting ahead and looking after our own insecurities
There is something that happens here that we feel superior, more enlightened, better in our choices

And whether that is Rangers and Celtic, or nationalist or Unionist
There is always a sense of getting ahead.

And this happens in Churches to - who has the most influence, who is going to get control what happens.

In India the Church had two political parties, and they would campaign against each other - and if one party got in, all the others would be removed from their posts.

And the only Churches where this sort of behaviour doesn't happen are Churches where people stop caring probably.

Or where people have truly truly learned the lesson of the cross,
That this world involves a giving up of profound weakness
A profound loss of control, of status, of success, of certainty
That is what faith is, giving all that matters to me into the possession of God.

The cross is three things for Paul - it is the moment of reconciliation between God and humanity where the price is paid,
It is the moment where we are crucified with Christ, our old self lost
And it is the moment where the world and its powers are judged and disarmed.

And it is probably the last two of those understandings which are present here...

It is profound loss, it is the parable of the seed going into the ground,
And then not knowing where the life is going to come
But believing that it will.

And that posture is totally the opposite of factions
And getting ahead.

Actually I am glad that there was conflict in Corinth
Or I am glad that Chloe's people said
I am glad that Paul wrote about it

Because in naming the conflict in Corinth
Paul named the conflicts that we face

And in naming the conflict
Paul makes us realise that being of one mind
I think will always involve tension
And frictions,
That resolution does not mean thinking the same thing
Or the removal of diversity
There are certainly points later on in the epistle where Paul gives diversity of thought.

Rather to be of one mind
Is to be of one mind about the deepest truths
That the gospel of Jesus Christ
Is the judgement of all the hierarchies of this world
And the call to live a life of profound loss that life may be given back by God
In the pattern of Jesus.

And the deep truth
That we are all one in Christ.

I want to close with a favourite poem of mine, by the former Warden of Iona Abbey, and minister in Newtonmore, Peter Miller...

He is a man of passions, and difference, he was famous when he came to Nethbridge occasionally for his hair, which was quite the most fantastic ever comb-over, and sometimes it would fall on the wrong side, bodies.

But he has this infectious enthusiasm for life,
Even amongst the pain of his body
As he lives with cancer, and he once wrote this poem about St Columba's Bay on Iona
Where Columba landed and through him and his monks, the Gospel was taken to
northern Scotland
Including right along this path here.

Each week on Iona there is a pilgrimage around the island, it's a deeply profound experience, a group of different people united in this stunning landscape, and Peter wrote this poem:

At Columba's Bay
they met;
Two of Iona's
countless pilgrims.
He, a pastor from Zaire;
She, a broker in Detroit.
And battered by the
autumn wind and rain
they shared their stories -
rooted in twentieth century realities,
yet both embedded
in a strange, life-giving

brokenness.
The hidden stories -
of poverty and torture,
of cancer and loneliness;
interweaving stories,
mirroring our
global interconnectedness.
And stories of faith;
of God's unfolding
in their lives
through ordinary days.
And suddenly it seemed
that for a moment
on that distant shore
they glimpsed
that basic truth -
that truly,
we are one

AMEN