

SUNDAY 22 JAN 17 - 08:00/10:00 DIVISIONS IN THE CHURCH

Readings:

1 Corinthians 1:10-18 - *Divisions in the Church*

¹⁰ Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. ¹² What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas (Peter)," or "I belong to Christ." ¹³ Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. ¹⁸ For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Matthew 4:12-23 (See Talk 20140126 - J calls first disciples)

Jesus Begins His Ministry in Galilee
(Mk 1.14—15; Lk 4.14—15)

¹² Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³ He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,

on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—

¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness

have seen a great light,

and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death

light has dawned."

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Jesus Calls the First Disciples
(Mk 1.16—20; Lk 5.1—11)

¹⁸ As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus Ministers to Crowds of People
(Mk 1.35—39; Lk 4.44; 6.17—19)

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

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Our gospel reading today describes the start of Jesus' ministry in Galilee and the call of the first 4 disciples. It's the year AD 26 and Jesus is gathering his inner circle together. Only 3 years later Jesus has been crucified, risen and ascended into heaven, having first commissioned 12 disciples to continue his work. And about 3 years after that, Saul, Paul as we better know him now, the much feared persecutor of the early church, also meets Jesus in a radical conversion event on the road to Damascus, and the missionary work of the 1st century church shifts into top gear. And in our Epistle reading today we find Paul, some 20 years later, writing to the church he planted in Corinth only a couple of years earlier with some words of admonition and correction. What's been going on?

Well it appears that word has reached Paul that the disciples at Corinth are dividing into factions and quarrelling among themselves. Some say that they are followers of Appollos an Alexandrian Christian, who the Bible tells us was an eloquent man well versed in the scriptures. And since the Greeks greatly prized rhetoric and oratory it's not surprising that he would have been highly regarded by some of the Corinthian Christians. Others say that they are followers of Cephas, Peter in the Greek, who spoke from the heart and whose ministry was more directed towards the Jewish community. Yet others aligned themselves with Paul whose ministry had been more focussed on the Gentiles. But Paul is having none of this and writes - was Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Aren't we all called to be members one of another joined together? And to drive the point home a few paragraphs later he launches into a major discussion comparing the church to a body with many different parts, all important in their own right yet working together in perfect harmony.

So, is that what the church looks like today - one united body? I don't know about you but it seems to me that our congregations are not all that much different from the Church in Corinth, riddled with factions, beset by difference and given to quarreling. This is the reality in so many places. There are faith communities and denominations based on ethnic groupings, political groupings, socio-economic groupings and so on. And in one sense there's nothing wrong with that - people tend to gravitate to groups which share similar views as themselves - we feel at home with people like ourselves. But as we do that we must recognise that Christ is not divided and that we are called to recognise the validity of faith in communions and congregations other than our own. God was not an Anglican - I know that comes as a shock to some of you.

Then there is what theologians call the Apollonian Dionysian dichotomy. There are some people who are Apollonian by nature and who want a form of the Christian faith that requires thinking. Anglicans on the whole very much fall into that category. Looking for a reasoned faith that makes sense. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with having an intellectually sound faith which stands up to critical scrutiny.

On the other hand Dionysian's want a faith that they can feel. I mean it's one thing to have a theology that makes sense and to read people like C S Lewis to see how it all fits together brilliantly. But others want to feel God. As someone with a scientific background I searched for a reasoned faith for many years but ultimately it didn't satisfy. More recently I've wanted to feel God. I want to surrender to God and feel God invade me, to possess me, to energise me. I want to feel every nerve and every sinew in my body tingle with the indwelling presence of Christ. After all he did pray in his great prayer, 'I pray Father that I may be in them even as you also are in me'. This experience of the infilling of God has been sought and found by many over the years. Paul certainly experienced it on the road to Damascus, and so can we. Maybe not in a single, dramatic, life-changing event like Paul but in small glimpses of heaven as Christ reveals himself to us.

We do have to be careful as Anglicans because we can make it all into a head trip. We have confirmation classes and we check people out to see whether they believe the right stuff - I wish it were that easy. I wish that it was just believing the right stuff. I can imagine judgement day - Jesus looking at me and saying OK Bottomley before we let you in - a few questions - The virgin birth - strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree - check one. But I'm afraid that on its own being sound and orthodox in answering the questions just won't cut it. It's much, much more than that. Christ wants to be in us and through us to do his work and will in the world. Is Christ in you? Is he a living transforming presence in your life? Do you sense him motivating you to do what he wants you to do, to be what he wants you to be, to become what he wants you to become?

Of course theology is not the only thing that divides the church. There's even a split in the Church today about music - some people like traditional hymns accompanied by organ and choir, others prefer the new contemporary style of praise songs played by a worship band. And in the middle we have Taize and Celtic styles. I read somewhere that the only difference between Taize and a machine gun is that a machine gun only has 100 rounds. Having said that it seems that many churches in the UK that are growing have adopted a contemporary style of worship which seems to appeal to a younger demographic. I personally have been at large worship events and have seen hundreds and thousands of young adults, and not so young, worshipping in a contemporary style with full hearts and tears in their eyes as they draw close to God's presence. It's strange that we should have differences of opinion over secondary issues such as music - but that's the sort of thing that divides today's church.

Let me quote scripture - Matthew chapter 13 - here's what it says: 'And the kingdom of God is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure chest what is old and what is new. That's it, that's the end of the parable. If it's all the old stuff, that some of us like, it's not the kingdom of God; if it's all the new stuff, that others like, it's not the kingdom of God. Somehow we need to make room for both the old and the new because if it doesn't include the old and the new then it's not the kingdom of God. That's what the kingdom of God is about - it brings people together; it should not be dividing us. For there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for all are one in Christ Jesus.

So how are we going to overcome our differences? 2000 years ago the eternal Christ laid aside his omnipotence and omnipresence and wrapped himself in human flesh and came to live on earth so that we might know him, and now the same Christ wants to indwell in us. We are the body of Christ - it says it over and over again in scripture. And as Christ's body we become the instruments of his love reaching out to others. How many of us can say that our lives are oriented towards serving Christ and his kingdom in this world. That when we wake up in the morning we say to God here I am, take me, use me, I'll go where you want me to go, I'll do what you want me to do, I'll be what you want me to be. So if you want to know what unifies the church it's a common mission. A common mission to reach out to the needs of the world - socially, economically, politically and most importantly spiritually. A church that is filled with people who are the body of Christ. Who are focussed on seeking first the kingdom of God and letting all the other stuff take care of itself. I don't know about you but that's what I'm praying for in my life and that's what I believe we should be striving for here in St Mary's Hook with Warsash.

As I bring things to a close now I feel that I ought to apologise; this has been a bit of a jumbled talk as we think about divisions in the church past and present. Sometimes we can become disillusioned and pessimistic about the future as we look at the disarray within the church and the state of the world around us. But our worship and the words that we use in worship can and should transform how we act and the way we see the world. It immerses us in a different story.

For example in Advent we can sing and pray “Come, Lord Jesus”, turning us away from the manic-consumerist version of Christmas, or away from a hopeless despair at world events. To pray “Come, Lord Jesus” in a world of Refugee Crisis, Brexit, Trump vs. Clinton and so on is to look to a more lasting vision of unity, hope, peace and joy. It is to align ourselves with a different kind of Kingdom.

In 1925 the renowned English poet T S Elliott penned his famous poem, The Hollow Men, the main theme of which is disillusionment and loss of hope and religious conversion. It's a great poem but he got it wrong. Perhaps the most quoted part of his poem are the last 4 lines which go like this: This is the way the world will end, this is the way the world will end, this is the way the world will end, not with a bang but with a whimper. But I've got great news for you. The world's not going to end with a bang, it's not going to end with a whimper. This is the way the world will end - the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God and he shall reign for ever and ever, Hallelujah, hallelujah!

Pray with me - Father God turn us from being believers who intellectually subscribe to doctrinal statements into people who are surrendered unto you so that you can invade us and possess us and fill us with your Spirit and make us into people who are committed to reaching out to the lonely, the least and the lost. Unify us and make us one body in Christ that together we can live out your will in the world. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen.