



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Third Sunday of Epiphany

readings: [Isaiah 9.1-4](#), [I Corinthians 1.10-18](#), [Matthew 4.12-23](#)

22 January 2023

Saying Thank You is never a bad way to start or finish a conversation – and although a sermon could be seen as a bit of a one-sided conversation, I am going to start and finish this morning by saying Thank You.

To start off with then – thank you for the invitation to speak from this pulpit. I have actually been invited once before – by Dean John – to preach for All Saints, but since we also have solemn festivities for All Saints, I was already tied up in Chesterfield. And thank you for inviting the Vicar of Chesterfield to Derby to preach during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity! Not just because we too are Christians at the Crooked Spire (!) but because for most of my life, and certainly through over 40 years of ordained ministry, I have found this week to be one of the most important events we could possibly engage in.

However, if we are serious in wanting to discover and deepen our unity in Christ, we are going to have to face up to quite a lot of difficult truths, one of which, as the Church of England has been reminded in spades over the past two weeks, is that we can't take for granted that we are united among ourselves as a national Church, let alone find adequate steps to bring about – or discover – our unity in Christ with other Christians.

So much of the writing of Saint Paul has to do with bringing about unity in churches where people have been all-too-human, falling out over practices and doctrines, just as churches continue to do today. He gets thoroughly exasperated with the Church in Galatia, expressing his astonishment with their antics, and even telling them that he wishes the knife would slip if they persist in believing they can be saved through circumcision according to the Law – and then of course there's the Church in Corinth!

We're hearing from I Corinthians over these Sundays between Epiphany and Lent, and what a divided community they are! They have made the people who brought the Gospel to them into a set of totems to assert their identity – 'I am for Paul'; 'I am for Apollos'; 'I am for Cephas' – and Paul has to put them straight on so many things, starting with a sharp reminder of whose Good News it was that was preached by Paul and Apollos and Cephas and for that matter, we hope, everyone else. Has Christ been divided? Paul asks them.

People who can't handle irony or rhetorical questions had maybe better stay away from reading Paul, because he is full of both. Of course Christ hasn't been divided, but here is Christ's Church at its very inception dividing itself. We haven't learned very much, have we? I remember as a History teacher trying to sell my subject to students and parents with the line that there is so much we can learn from History, while crossing my fingers in the hope that some clever spark didn't come forward to point out how little human beings have actually learned from it.

One way the Church of England today has been seeking unity is the search for what is called a 'Jesus-shaped Church'. I have major problems with this, and I'll tell you why. Jesus was fully human and fully divine – we are fully human but still only on the way to sharing his divinity. To measure ourselves against Jesus is to use him as what the Prayer Book describes as 'an ensample of godly life', yet we will never get there, we will never measure up, because we are still on the way. We are setting ourselves up for constant failure – and while the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book this year tells us rightly that it's OK to fail, we human beings are not very good at living with constant failure, so best not set ourselves up to fail.

Instead, Paul calls his churches insistently to be Christ-like, to take part in the new life won for us by Jesus's death and resurrection, to be lifted up into God because the risen Christ now sits at God's right hand.

This is why he ends I Corinthians with some complicated reflections on the impact of the resurrection and the realities of eternal life. The step-change in History brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus means that we are called to something that goes beyond an example of godly life into a completely new way of living that depends not on us but on Christ. This is the Christ we discover as a Friend through studying Scripture, through constant prayer; the Christ into whom we have been baptised, whose Sacraments we celebrate.

Indeed, when calling Peter and Andrew, Jesus himself did not invite them to come and be his clones, but told them that if they followed him he would make them use their gifts as fishermen to catch people's souls. We have such a rich variety of gifts in each of us as individuals, and certainly across the whole Church community. If Christ valued those gifts in his followers in Galilee, he – who gave those gifts in the first place – will certainly be wanting us to use those gifts today in the service of his risen life – each in our own way, which is what Paul will tell the Christians of Corinth later on in his epistle.

This is why as a Church leader I have always opposed joining campaigning or pressure groups, for I have wanted to value all those whom Christ has brought into his Church – not just the ones I agree with, but even those I think are wrong. This is why, as an Anglican by choice rather than by default, I want to celebrate and value a church community which – at least in principle, and often by the skin of its teeth – belongs to all the people of this nation. And this is why it grieves me so when I see and hear fellow-Christians saying all over social media and elsewhere 'I am for (or against) Philip North'; or 'I am for (or against) blessing this, that or the other sort of relationship'. Our calling is to be for Christ, and if our understanding of being for Christ leads us to disagree with each other, then we could do with some humility to admit that we don't actually perceive or understand everything perfectly. The risen Christ was notoriously difficult to tie down, yet – as a wise ecumenical thinker once told me – if we see Christ as the hub at the centre of a wheel, and ourselves as being along the spokes, then the nearer to Christ we are, the nearer we are to each other too.

With the amount of hatred and rejection that is frequently expended in expressing different viewpoints in the Church, I find myself longing in vain to hear anyone saying clearly and simply as I do now: 'I am for Christ', and acknowledging that being for Christ is a life-long journey, and most of all – as again Paul will say to the Corinthians – that the whole enterprise is summed up in one little word: Love.

For me – and I hope also for you – it is by being plainly, gifts and warts and all, for Christ, and by trying my utmost to live in love, that I can fulfil my own calling, respecting and accepting those whose views and callings look so different from mine, including those I don't care for much. And if we are all able to do that, we might just capture Isaiah's vision:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;

those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.

Now I'll keep my promise to end with a Thank You. Some of you may remember the late, great John Ebdon, and his wireless programmes that took a sideways look at the BBC archive. He took to ending his whimsical reflections with words I love and am going to use now:

'If you have been, thank you for listening'.

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