

Sunday 5th February 2017 Cathedral, Grahamstown 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		Epiphany 5 Series on 1 Corinthians Education Sunday
Isaiah 58:1-9a	Ps 112:1-10	1 Corinthians 12:12-27
		Matthew 5:13-20
“BUT I’M JUST A BABY TOE - CIKICANE!” ONE BODY, MANY PARTS: WHERE DO I FIT IN?		

To read 1 Corinthians is to explore the life of the early church, and the concerns they faced, the challenges they encountered – to see something of the “life, loves, and hates of a particular church at the inception of Christianity” – and to hear God’s word to Corinth.

But to read 1 Corinthians is also to hear God’s word to us.

Background

Corinth was a large city, a trading centre, a major sea port, a centre for ship-building, a centre of industry, a centre for the arts; a mixture of races and cultures and religious practice and belief. Inhabitants came from far and wide. Corinth was a place of many religions – Greek and Roman gods and goddesses, Egyptian religions, mystic religions and cults; there was a large Jewish community. The early Christian converts came from these traditions, with their life-styles, worship practices and beliefs.

A letter written by the apostle Paul, to the church in Corinth – a church that he had founded, planted, through preaching and through conversion. It was a church close to his heart. A new community of Christians! He had received news of divisions and internal strife in the church, and had also received a letter asking a number of questions. 1 Corinthians is his initial reply.

Belonging

Now we make a big jump ...into the life of that new community, the church in Corinth, with people from all sorts of backgrounds, different languages, cultures - a community of diversity, its awkward

relationships, its suspicions, its jealousies, arguments, its struggles at times to co-operate, to work together – does this sound familiar, when we look around Grahamstown?

But the church in Corinth was also a community of energy, faith, many gifts, lots of resources, wonderful people, so much going for it, a special place to be, a community of new life in Christ, a community of hope, a sign of the kingdom of God – does this also sound familiar?

I think that most of us know what it is like to be the newcomer. We arrive at our new school, a new place of work, perhaps into a circle of people who all know one another really well – but we are the stranger, the outsider. How do we feel? Frightened? Nervous? Lonely? Excited?

One of the greatest human needs that any of us have is to belong. I want to belong – to have people who accept me; to be part of a group; to be able to talk and unburden ourselves and know that others understand. To be part of a community where we feel accepted, at home, understood.

This works both ways – when we are the newcomers, the outsiders, will we be welcomed, accepted, made to feel at home?

When we are the old-timers, the in-crowd, those who have been around for years – do we make space and room for others? Or do we send out the message that there is no room for others, that we are the only ones who count?

How does it work? How do we live together in peace?

Let's see how St Paul addressed this in his letter to the church in Corinth.

One body, many parts (12:12-27)

V 12 “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.” (NRSV)

This body metaphor or picture justifies diversity. It works against the notion of honour and importance.

V 13 – “For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”

The Christians at Corinth were of great cultural and social diversity – yet they shared a common baptism, and had common access to the Holy Spirit. They belonged together as one family, whether they liked it or not!

V 15 “If the foot were to say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body.”

The foot feels excluded because it is not a hand! St Paul identifies with members of the church who are being made to feel inferior, or marginalised – and he insists on their rightful place in the body. We need that baby toe! We need that cिकicane!

V 21 “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’

St Paul here confronts the superior attitudes of the more prominent Christians in Corinth, who were saying about others, “We don’t need them. We don’t want them here.”

No-one can dismiss others as dispensable.

V 22-24 “the weaker or less honourable parts of the body...” - we protect and clothe ourselves to keep ourselves warm and safe; we wear shoes and jackets.

Likewise, we protect and give honour and greater respect, greater care, to those amongst us who are weaker, more vulnerable, who need greater support and attention.

Life with a difference

How counter-cultural is this! When normally the weakest, the more vulnerable, are pushed aside, sidelined, forgotten, or even abused or mistreated, in the body of Christ, the most vulnerable receive the most care.

The church in Corinth was called by God to be an alternative community: to show how people should live and work together in harmony, with all their differences; to show how the cross of Christ was the uniting factor; to show that because they had been baptised, because they had been given one Holy Spirit to drink, they belonged together; to show that diversity was not a threat to unity, but rather, diversity and difference makes true unity possible through the different contributions that everyone made.

The church in Corinth was also called to realise that the variety of gifts should not lead to disunity. Nor should diversity and difference create a hierarchy in which those on the top despise those further down the scale.

What about us?

The age-old lesson: we need one another. And each one of us is needed. But... you might say... I am not important... I am just a baby toe! Where do I fit in?

You may be just a baby toe... but without you, the entire body is unable to walk! Some years ago, for reasons of fashion, some women

cut off their baby toe, so as to be able to wear a particular type of shoe. Just a toe – I won't miss it! But to their horror, they found that they could not walk. They could not keep their balance! When you get up and walk away from church after the service, feel your toes... how they keep you balanced. So small, but so important!

There is a story from the Old Testament of a cruel king who had defeated many of his enemies. When he captured his enemy rulers, he did not kill them; instead, he cut off their thumbs, and he cut off their big toes. They could no longer walk. They could not pick things up properly – try it! And so they were forced for the rest of their lives to crawl around on their hands and knees, scrabbling for food, trying desperately to survive.

We need our big toes, we need our baby toes; we need the gifts and ministries of each person amongst us!

And more than this: our life together as the body of Christ, where everyone matters, where everyone is valued, where we show particular care to the weaker, the most vulnerable, instead of pushing them aside – when we do this, it is a powerful witness to others.

We are horrified by the news of the deaths of 94 mental patients in Gauteng, due to neglect by the provincial government. So tragic, sad, and utterly unacceptable. It is tragic, and completely unacceptable, when people are in the care of others, and they are neglected and abused in this way. How can government officials – how can anyone – be so negligent? So uncaring?

Or when work is done for the provincial government, invoices are not being paid, because the officials who have to authorise the payment are waiting for a bribe before they release the payment – but meanwhile the workers are without their money, families are suffering – how dare such officials behave like this? How can they be so uncaring? So negligent? Causing the most vulnerable to suffer?

Or when we go to the clinic or the hospital, and the nursing staff are rude and ignore us, or drink tea and laugh and talk while the people wait patiently – such behaviour is completely contrary to the gospel of Christ.

When we walk rough-shod over the most vulnerable, the weakest, we are acting totally against Gospel values, the values of Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

I encourage each of us to be part of the life of the Cathedral. Contribute where you can. Support financially. We always need volunteers to help our worship to run smoothly and well. Altar servers. Readers. Sunday School and Children's Church. Welcomers and sidespeople to greet and make people feel welcome. People to make and serve tea after the service, to help build community. Reaching out a hand in friendship to a stranger, a newcomer. Smile. Greet. Make friends. Cross the boundaries.

Don't be afraid of diversity. A sad trend amongst churches, that people go where it feels comfortable – with our own language, or culture; people avoid or walk away from the difficulties of working together, coping with difference. That is the way of death. Embrace diversity. It is a gospel gift.

In the days in SA before 1994, the days of apartheid, we as Christians were called to be different, to reach out to one another across the barriers. Now in the SA of 2017, where race is being used in politics to stir up anger and win support, we as Christians are again called to be different, to reach out to one another, to stand together as brothers and sisters in Christ. It is not always easy or comfortable. But there is no better place to stand.

© Andrew Hunter
February 2017