

Sermon for 25th January 2026, Year A, Epiphany 3.

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Isaiah 9:1-4; I Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

Sermon

Each year, this past week from the 18th to the 25th of January is celebrated as the annual week of prayer for Christian Unity, in which Christians around the world commit to praying for that unity that Jesus himself desired for us when he prayed for all his disciples, both then and now, saying: “Father, the glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may they be one, as we are one”.

Unfortunately, Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians reveals that it did not take long for divisions and factions to take over the early Church. And it’s hard to deny that we are still in the same state even today. Whether we look at the ancient divisions between Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and thousands of Protestant and Reformed Churches, or we narrow our focus to individual dioceses, or even individual charges, we still see endless and intense disagreement over all manner of issues, all of which have the power and tendency to drown out the message of the Cross which St Paul wants to keep pointing to.

It’s not actually clear from Paul’s letter what the specific issues were that the church he founded in Corinth were facing, although we can probably figure it out from some of the accusations he makes in his letter – the rich refusing to share food with the poor for example. In many ways it doesn’t really matter; sometimes, the more we dive into the detail of the individual disagreements, the more likely we are to make those disagreements personal, so that we end up hating a person or group rather than simply disagreeing with their arguments.

For example, some years ago when I was a novice nun, I was very struck that in the community of sisters I first joined, none of them ever talked with each other about church doctrine, theology, or any of the weighty and contentious issues that obsess Churches around the world. They would talk about the vegetable garden, the hens in the yard, the number of ducklings in the pond, the people they were praying for, and of course the weather, but never would they speak of what they thought of St Paul. When I asked them why, they said “When you have lived together for 30 or 40 years, you know what each other thinks about everything, and since we know where all the disagreements lie, we simply choose not to speak of such things, so that we don’t upset each other, and can focus on being kind to one another instead.”

I’m not suggesting that this is a universal solution to conflict, even in the Church. After all, enforced silence can often cover over injustice and abuse, and leave people to suffer alone. No one should be silenced for the sake of a false and pretended unity.

So, what is St Paul actually saying when he calls for the members of the church to all be in agreement, or, literally, ‘that ye all speak the same thing’ as the old King James Bible puts it. This sounds impossible. How can you fix major disagreements by simply ordering everyone to agree and say the same thing?

Fortunately, a little research reveals that this is not quite what Paul is demanding. The phrase translated “all speak the same thing” is apparently commonly used in Greek literature in the appeals of ancient orators for all to live in political or social harmony. What I believe Paul is calling for, is for people to find unity of mind and spirit through a common commitment to loving and serving one another. He is not asking them to suppress disagreement so that love can then emerge, but asking them to love each other first and foremost, and then see what happens to the disagreement.

We may easily forget that Paul's churches were a radical attempt at building a Christlike community out of incredibly diverse people, something which had never been done before, even in Israel. In this letter alone, Paul tries to bring together a church made up of the rich and the poor, the Jew and the Greek, the slave and the free, not to mention male and female, and also eunuchs. These are disparate groups of people that lack any of the traditional bonds of close ethnicity, family, culture, socialisation, or personal experience that would normally have held a community together. And today we might also want to add 'straight and gay' to this roll call of diversity.

So, naturally, when tensions arise, a community starts to fracture along these lines of difference. To protect and defend their interests and needs, they form factions and line up behind particular leaders who seem to speak for them, and they no longer hear anything spoken by the other side.

'I belong to Paul,' some start to say. 'I belong to Apollos.' Or they appeal to a higher authority. Who is more important than Paul and Apollos? Why St Peter of course! 'I belong to Peter!' And then someone who is no doubt feeling rather pleased with themselves invokes the highest authority of all – 'I belong to Christ' – probably thinking 'that will show them all how petty they are being.' But I'm glad Paul points out that this is just as bad, for it drags Christ down into the argument, as if he is just one voice among many – the middle way perhaps, for right-thinking people who are too wise to get caught up in the arguments. 'No, sorry, you're no better than the others,' says Paul. No position can be correct if it doesn't first seek to serve and love the others as brothers and sisters.

In the verse that comes just after the end of our reading, Paul quotes Isaiah saying, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." So, if you find yourself saying we're right and they're wrong, and our way is clearly Christian and their way is clearly wicked, and we

can't move on until they admit defeat and repent, then Paul has a message for you, and that's the message of the Cross.

For Jesus himself didn't win over the world with irrefutable arguments, but with love, and not just fine words about love such as you might hear from a preacher like me, but love that is willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of others.

It's this love that was being forgotten in Corinth, and which is so often still forgotten in our own day. There are, after all, so many things for us to argue and worry about, from the latest pronouncements and threats from megalomaniac political leaders, to the ever-increasing rises in our cost of living and the decline of public services, alongside rising hostility towards any vulnerable group that can be presented as a lightning rod for our anger, blame, and frustration.

Meanwhile, we're all anxious that our churches are declining in numbers, that there's never enough money, that our leaders are incompetent, that those people over there are selfish and unkind, that those other people are still holding grudges against us from 40 years ago, that some people are too woke, and others are bigots, and how can we possibly be expected to love them?

And Paul simply points to Jesus Christ on the Cross. 'It is foolishness,' he says, 'but this is how you love them.'