

**Difference and diversity.** This is a church with a lot of different opinions, attitudes, styles of worship - ways of living. But I hope we get along. Not everyone does. Why is it that communities can't live together in peace? What is it about "other people" that rubs us up the wrong way?

People throughout history have struggled somehow to get on with their neighbours, with those who are different. We see terrible violence over this - muslim factions in Syria [the struggle between Sunni and Shia in most of the Middle East]; between so called Christian and Muslim in Central African Republic; and world wide between rich and poor, them and us.

There exists mutual incomprehension and mistrust between divided worlds. There is a great gulf fixed, a gulf of entrenched ignorance and suspicion and malice.

Corinth in the first century was a busy, loud exciting place. It had been a reasonably wealthy trading centre for a couple of centuries at least and had attracted people of many religions and races to settle there. The Jewish writer, Philo, tells us that there was a flourishing Jewish community in Corinth and other classical writers supply detail of temples to gods and goddesses of the Greek pantheon. In other words, to be a Corinthian was to have grown up in a diverse, competitive, multicultural society. When Christian missionaries came to Corinth they obviously found it difficult to change this basic ethos.

St Paul had a close association with the city. The book of Acts tells of his own missionary activity, which while successful, certainly had its ups and downs. He stayed in Corinth for 18 months – quite a long time in his whirlwind career, suggesting that he not only saw opportunities for the gospel but that he was fond of the place. It is thought that he had a lot of correspondence with them – the books that we know as first and second Corinthians (from which a reading came this morning) being only two of four or more letters to the church there. He mentions a lot of people by name, kept in touch with his converts and expected them to be known to the wider Christian community.

Other missionaries obviously saw the potential in Corinth too and a spirit of rivalry seems to have developed. Perhaps a feature of life there, typical of the Corinthians to pick up a good idea and turn it into something to argue about. But the outcome was a divided and contentious church. Divided between the disciples of Paul and the bold and charismatic leader Apollos.<sup>1</sup>

St Paul is not afraid of a bit of contention and Christian infighting when he believes the truth is at stake. The epistle today is from the beginning of his letter and obviously gets right down to his reason for writing- about divisions among them.

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<sup>1</sup> Ac 18:24-8

In Corinth it is clear that the gospel is not just being undermined but is actually fundamentally misunderstood because the Christian community is divided. Corinthian Christians are being fiercely loyal to whichever one of the missionaries it was that brought the gospel to their own particular group, and are forgetting what the gospel is actually about. Whose death brought you salvation, Paul demands? In whose name do you accept the baptism that leads to new life? Is this about your teacher or your God?

St Paul knows that the gospel of Christ is rubbing against the grain, not just for the Corinthians but for most of us. Who are the people we follow? Who are those we ignore? I think we, too, have our differences but we get along. But what about the outside world? People who are very different from us in attitude and behaviour and in their social conditions.

Today is World Leprosy Day. I am glad we pay attention to those working to bring relief to leprosy sufferers.

This is also Homelessness Sunday - when we are made to think of the 'others' in society. Some people that we take very little account of; some we just ignore; some who are in front of us but very difficult to see – the homeless man sitting on the pavement with his head down, the girl begging in the doorway, the Big Issue seller trying to catch our attention, as well as the ones we don't see – the abused and frightened women and children living in sheltered accommodation and afraid to go out in case their 'man' catches them; or the addicts who are sleeping rough in a corner of a city cemetery; and the AIDS sufferer wasting away in a hospice room, as well as the sufferer with leprosy skin in a far off country.

These are also the ones for whom Christ died, those whom Jesus came to help to make a fresh start. How do we recognise the humanity of all others and the fact that God loved THE WORLD – all of us – so much he sent his Son? Last night we celebrated Burns' night and do we still need reminded that 'man to man shall brithers be for a' that'? That is good gospel.

The gospel rubs the wrong way for most of us. The competitive instinct, the instinct to dominate, the instinct to define our own value by denying someone else's is so basic that Paul knows that the gospel sounds like 'foolishness' to most of us, most of the time. When we, along with the church at Corinth, fight about who has the 'best' version of the gospel, then we are turning our backs on the crucified God. What has the gospel got to do with the aggressive determination to be proved right? It is the cross that is God's way in the world and the demonstration of his power. The power to accept, to create, recreate and to save is so stunningly different from anything we understand as power that it is barely recognisable.

When Jesus walks by the Sea of Galilee, he calls disciples to follow him. He offers them a mission, a chance to attract others, as they have just been attracted. Their

acceptance starts a chain reaction that has never yet fizzled out, despite many wrong turns and shameful misunderstandings.

'shall brithers be ...' It is clear that from the start there have been divisions and arguments in the Church - from the first disciples, the missionary apostles, the perceived need for councils and creeds... and it is still apparent today. However our task, our duty of love, remains the same - to accept difference, to remember that we are all in need of God's love, to accept 'other' people as we are accepted. - all the same family - all brothers.

We are all called to continue to preach the puzzling, spectacular, strange, unearned foolishness of God, who loves us and saves us. Christians have been as guilty as anyone else of wanting to be clever, successful and right, but if we keep preaching Christ crucified, maybe one day we will convert even ourselves.