

26 January 2020



1 Corinthians 1: 10-18

I love watching films and DVD's especially thrillers and espionage tales, and a favourite of mine is "A Bridge of Spies with Tom Hanks as the Lawyer James Donovan who is called on to defend a Russian Spy, Rudolf Abel who has been arrested in the USA. It is meant to be a show trial, to show that the US gives even Russian spies a fair trial, but Donovan takes it a step further and when Abel is convicted at the first trial, takes it all the way to the Supreme Court to make a legal point. Donovan is later involved in the negotiations to swap The Russian spy Rudolf Abel for the American spy Pilot Gary Powers. There is a very telling scene in the beginning of the film where the CIA get involved and try to influence Donovan to violate attorney-client privilege' and disclose to the CIA what Abel might have said to Donovan in the course of a private conversation. Donovan defends his attorney client privilege with reference to the constitution which makes everybody an American. Here is the clip from the film

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1Mav-tOp-8>

Donovan is of Irish extraction and Hoffman is of German extraction, but what makes them American is the rule book, the US constitution. If they agree to the constitution, then they are American, wherever they have come from. If they want to disregard the rule book, then they are betraying what it is to be an American.

This is a vitally important concept in American politics, and is a very clear reason why discrimination on the grounds of race, creed, gender etc. should play no part in American politics as it is unconstitutional. You cannot claim a special privilege of being American, even if your family came over in the Mayflower with the Pilgrim Fathers, you are an American just the same as a new immigrant who has received American citizenship, united by the privileges of the American constitution.

This desire to discriminate because you are actually considered to be a first class person, not like the second class people over there, is deeply embedded in the heart of sinful mankind who wants to have a reason to think themselves better than others. But it is completely wrong on Christian grounds, and no Christian should ever be a racist. St Paul deals with this matter in this part of our reading from 1 Corinthians 1, where some had been separating themselves from others on the grounds that they followed a different leader who had been in the church before. This is not to say that people cannot have different opinions about incidental matters- in the Church of England we have high church and low church, central church charismatic church, evangelical church traditional catholic church, and these are perfectly valid expressions of how we conduct our worship and practice. But the danger with this is that it introduces a point of difference, between fellow Christians whereby we can say, but we are right and they are wrong, and so seek to say that we are better than others. Jesus warned the disciples enough times about trying to claim who was the greatest

Mr 9:33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?"

34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." 36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37 "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

And Mr 10:35 James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." 36 And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" 37 And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." 41 When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. 42 So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

43 But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

Crystal clear teaching, but we always want to find a reason to say that we are better than others don't we?

So Paul has to remind the Corinthians of their unity in Christ.

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.

Great principle, but why has Paul had to say this?

11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

Not just disagreements and debates but quarrels which have divided the church.

12 What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ."

Members are following the teaching of one leader and disagreeing with the teaching of another and this is leading to division. This is not primarily about doctrine but a power game – who is the greatest, who is in control of the church, are you as an old song put it, are you **"in with the 'in' crowd"**

What are these divisions? I follow Paul- Paul the founder of the church, the first person who preached the gospel, I am one of the founder members before you lot came along. Following the original purpose and was there before going to church was popular.

I follow Apollos- a great learned preacher of Jewish background, who was not so keen on the things of the spirit – very sound but perhaps a bit academic, I am one of the cleverer people who likes to be intellectually stimulated, not all this populist stuff around Paul

I follow Cephas – Peter, one of the original disciples not a late follower like Paul, a very different character than Paul, much more emotional and impulsive and perhaps more extrovert than Paul or Apollos.

I follow Christ, I am not one who follows personalities, I am above such petty things

Can you hear yourself in these descriptions, because considering yourself superior to others is such a temptation in the Christian life.

But Paul will have none of it. Some were saying that they were better because they were baptised by Paul or Apollos or Cephas. He replies

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.)

Baptism is into Christ and we are one in him, in the same way that accepting the American constitution makes you an American in our example earlier. You are not any kore an American citizen because you family took your oath of allegiance before George Washington, Barack Obama, George Bush or Donald Trump. You agree to its demands and that is it.

In the same way we are in in Christ Jesus through our profession of faith and our baptism

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.

We are Christians because we believe in Jesus Christ and what he has done for us. Now we may study theology and have degrees in it – good for you, or we may just have a very simple intellectual understanding, it does not matter, you are not judged to eb a Christian on the basis of your intellect but on what is going on in your heart. Is Jesus Christ your Lord, do you confess this with your mouth and believe in your heart that he has been raised from the dead? If so ,you are saved

Ro 10:9 because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

The power of God comes to those who with simple trust believe this, and not because you follow a certain teacher or leader. Now we may gain great insights from a teacher, who may express things in a way we can appreciate. But this teacher is a fallible human being and will get things wrong. Martyn Lloyd Jones story, Westminster Chapel. The teacher we must all follow is Jesus, not a leader at the time. If we put our trust ultimately in a human leader, then we are, as Paul puts it, emptying the cross of its power, because it is because of Him (Jesus) that you are saved, not the teaching of any human being.

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.

What saves you what sustains you in the Christian life is the teaching of Jesus, his teaching on salvation, on prayer on communion, on fellowship, on forgiveness, on humility on truth, on being a child of God. You want to be a better Christian, then do not neglect the treading of scripture and the teaching of Jesus. Not teaching on the teaching of Jesus, but His word. Books and commentaries are all very well and can help us greatly, but they are no substitute for the actual words of Jesus, of Paul, or the epistles and the prophets and patriarchs in the bible. They all cry with a common witness, Jesus is Lord.

That is why when I came here 16 years ago we adopted a motto from Philippians 3:10
Php 3:10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

I want to know Christ, not the teaching of Paul Greenland or Audrey Cozens my predecessor, or Bishop Stephen or any other teacher, but the teaching of Jesus. That is what unites us in fellowship in Jesus Christ, not our practices or churchmanship or even the St Andrew's way of doing things, but our common faith in Jesus Christ, just as in our film, the common acceptance of the constitution made people US citizens.

So as we come to the end of the Epiphany season with its emphasis on the showing of Christ to the world, let us now recommit ourselves to knowing Christ – not knowing about Christ, but knowing Christ. This is what will be the key factor as to the future health and direction of St Andrew's. Not who is the vicar or preacher, but whether we follow Christ and his leading and determine that racism and personalities and power games are relegated to the rubbish bin where they belong.

**As we are gathered Jesus is here;
One with each other, Jesus is here.
Joined by the Spirit, washed in the blood,
Part of the body, the church of God.
As we are gathered Jesus is here,
One with each other, Jesus is here.**