

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 26th January 2020

Isaiah 9: 2 – 4; 1 Cor 1: 10 – 18; Matt 4: 12 - 23

Right from the very beginning the church was divided. The letter we read from this morning – First Corinthians – was written less than 20 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. In it, Paul writes to the very young Christian congregation in the city of Corinth,

I appeal to you ... in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: agree among yourselves, and avoid divisions; be firmly joined in unity of mind and thought.¹

In the 21st century we are used to the church of Jesus Christ appearing divided. Last week, for example, I was with others from the Christian congregations in Corstorphine at a meeting of the Corstorphine Churches Together group. Last week was also designated as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity by a national body called Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.

The existence of bodies that emphasise the words 'churches together' is a sure way to know that churches aren't together. If they were, what need would there be for groups that seek to bring churches together?

In the 21st century, we are used to the church appearing divided, but in the letter we read from this morning we discover that the church was divided right from the very beginning of its life. I would go even further. The Gospel reading this morning suggests that the church was divided from before its beginning.

Jesus Christ didn't make his way from conception to death and resurrection on his own. He did it in the company of others, disciples that he called to walk with him. We can be sure, and the Gospel goes on to make it clear, that these disciples were not all of the same mind: they disagreed; they argued; they fell out; they came from different backgrounds; they were called in different ways; they would go on in the future to partake in different missions to different places.

The church was divided in the beginning, from the before the beginning, and it has been divided right up to the present day. No wonder Paul felt the need to write to one of the earliest congregations and appeal to its members to agree among themselves; to avoid divisions; to be firmly joined in unity of mind and thought. That is a problem that will take centuries to sort out, and it needs to be tackled early on.

But, having said that, what do we think really of this call from Paul for unity of mind and thought? Is it so important that the Church of Jesus Christ in Corinth, or Corstorphine, or Britain and Ireland or anywhere in the world is 'together'? After all, what would the church, or indeed the world, be like if all its members thought the same? Is it not the case that institutions, societies, families, for example, all benefit when different people express their differences? Thinking and doing things differently is a spur to innovation, progress and development.

Competition between people with different ideas can be brutal when it is painful, but it can also be liberating and exciting when it innovates and encourages change. If we all thought the same and agreed with each other, we might all be members of the same church and that Church of Jesus Christ might be united, but how would new members be able to break into our cosy club? How would young people be able to find their own place separate from their elders, or express their own views?

¹ 1 Cor 1: 10

In wider society, if everyone expressed a unanimity of thought and agreement, we would all vote in elections for the same political party. Where would that leave us? Who wants to live in a one-part state? Whether in the church or in society, in so many ways, is it not good that we disagree in mind and thought.

Moreover, the Church of Jesus Christ isn't divided just because people think differently, they tend to think differently because they are different. We see that in the passage we read from First Corinthians this morning. There were divisions amongst the members in that congregation because Paul says that those members had been influenced by different ministers who did things differently. Some were saying, I am Paul's man, or I am for Apollos, or I follow Cephas. Members of the church had been influenced by different teachers, so expressed their faith differently.

Many of the things, not all the things, but many of the things that we argue over and fall out about can be traced back to the significant fact that we are different. Worship in a Church of Scotland, in Corstorphine amidst an ageing congregation that is at least 90 percent white British looks very, very different compared to a worship service in the southern states of the USA amidst a young congregation that is at least 90 percent black. That is because our history is different, our culture is different, our social setting is different, and the things that we need Jesus Christ to save us from are different.

When we recognise that the church has not been able to take Paul's advice and avoid divisions, we should recognise that many of our divisions are justifiable and necessary. We should also recognise, of course, that many of our divisions are also not justifiable and not necessary. They are the result of stubbornness, or small-mindedness, or an unwillingness to compromise, or suspicion, or bigotries of one form or another.

When this the case, when our lack of unity of mind and thought is something that leaves a church or a congregation feeling more dead than alive, more like yesterday than tomorrow, more oppressive than liberating, then we should pay more attention to Paul's appeal that we agree amongst ourselves.

I was pondering all of this at that meeting I was talking about earlier, the Corstorphine Churches Together meeting. The meeting included a discussion about the upcoming Corstorphine Fair, which takes place in St. Margaret's Park on the 6th of June this year.

At the Corstorphine Fair, the churches of Corstorphine have a stall that they share together, and at the Corstorphine Fair the churches act together. For the past two Fairs members of the churches have given out cupcakes for free with messages of love, hope, or peace iced on them. At a Fair where many things cost money, it has been a demonstration of the generosity of faith that lies at the heart of Christian theology, and it is an expression of the unity of faith in Jesus Christ that lies at the heart of our otherwise separate congregations. By acting in this way, we are not competing to attract new members, but acting together to demonstrate the virtues of the Christian life.

If you want to get involved this year, when we will be handing out packets of seeds to Fair goers, and getting to know each other better as we always do, then speak to me or to Vicky Hunter or Ian Kirkpatrick who are also on the committee.

It struck me that at the Fair we are not the only movement represented that, for good reasons, lacks a unity of mind and thought. Political parties are also represented, but unlike the churches, the many different political parties all have separate tables to promote themselves, their policies, and to encourage new members to join.

The different churches have one shared table and speak to the community with one voice about our shared faith in Jesus Christ. The political parties have individual tables and speak to the local community with competing voices about their shared belief in democratic politics. I wondered whether as churches we should not actually do the same as political parties and have those separate tables in order to express the choice of Christian worship that is available in Corstorphine. But then I thought, there are times when we want to express ourselves individually, and there are times when we need to express our unity.

That could be true of politics as well. Wouldn't it be heart-warming, after a general election where political parties have appropriately expressed vigorously their differences, if at the Corstorphine Fair when the community is gathered together to celebrate together, on that day when we are united as a community, if those political parties were able to share a table together as a demonstration of the integrity of politics and political action, and as a way of encouraging people to take an interest in politics and political action?

I wonder if such an expression might help the public to feel a sense of security. It would send a message - for all that we disagree at election time, it's not like we hate each other, the message would say. For all that we have different political allegiances, we all agree that democratic politics is a good thing to have and to be involved in.

Perhaps in the Church of Jesus Christ we should try to see ourselves and our differences, not so much as an expression of disunity, but as expressions of diversity. When Paul appeals for a unity of thought and mind and an avoidance of divisions, he isn't asking that congregations and branches of the church become less diverse, but that they acknowledge and come together over the things that they hold in common.

Acknowledging what we have in common, and taking opportunities to express that, helps us to express our diversity with confidence. What we have in common, of course, is our belief in Jesus Christ. We may have had a diversity of experiences of Jesus Christ, as those first disciples did, but it is the Christ of the Gospels that is the bedrock of the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ.

So, whether it is in a congregation, or a denomination, or in our wider society let's acknowledge our differences and celebrate our diversity. But, let us also seek to discover and celebrate our unity - those things that unites us across our congregations, our denominations, and in our wider society and country.

Let's spend less time being angry that people disagree with us, and more time being glad that they do. Let's spend less time looking for opportunities to express our disagreement, and more time discovering what we hold in common - where our minds and our thoughts are united - and find opportunities to express and celebrate these.