

Origin and destiny

Today marks the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, an annual event that gives Christians from different denominations the opportunity to pray for one another and, where possible, to come together for worship and fellowship. Hence our slightly abbreviated service here this morning followed by a gathering with other nearby churches, and the Big Sing that will follow. And what a good occasion to begin a series on Paul's Letter to the Corinthians. For the next few weeks we are going to be going through the opening chapters of this letter sent by the great Christian missionary Paul to a small church in Corinth, in ancient Greece.

Paul, of course, had an interesting story. He had been a fanatical opponent of the Christian church. He had persecuted Christians ferociously but had experienced an extraordinary encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. There he had been called by Christ, and had gone on to become the foremost missionary of the church he had previously sought to destroy. So it was that he had come to Corinth and preached the message of Christ there and a church had formed and exciting things had happened. In a city that was divided and that was organised hierarchically according to wealth and status and prestige, something remarkable had come about. Paul has a word for what had happened: it's a Greek word, *koinonia* and it means community, bonding, togetherness. We translate it 'fellowship' but that word has tame associations of tea and polite company. *Koinonia* is more cutting edge than that... It means solidarity between people where divisions and pecking orders are overcome and where everyone can flourish no matter what their identity or their status or their background. This results in a radical sharing and generosity of spirit that marked a stark contrast to the life of the city of Corinth. And such *koinonia* or fellowship is what happens when Christ really takes shape in the church as people are moulded and shaped by the Spirit of Christ.

Things, however, were going awry in Corinth. New hierarchies were forming with some people claiming they were more 'spiritual' than others; there was sexual immorality going on; social pecking orders were reasserting themselves. The precious, counter-cultural, subversive *koinonia* that had so characterised life in the church in Corinth was in jeopardy – and so Paul has to write to try to sort things out.

It was a difficult task. Evidently there was some anti-Paul feeling in the church. He wasn't popular with everyone. Some people didn't rate him. How was he to call the church to account and help them to rediscover their radical witness? Well, Paul's strategy seems to be to begin his letter to the Corinthians with a bit of flattery, a bit of soft soap to butter them up. He thanks God for the Corinthians: he wishes them grace and peace, says some nice things about them. Soon, more pointed remarks will follow, but what I want to do here is to look carefully at these opening verses of the letter. And I want to pick out just a couple of words that appear here that we might easily overlook, but which I think are significant in Paul's handling of the problems at Corinth.

The first is the word 'called'. The word occurs three times in this short passage – firstly in the very first verse where Paul describes himself as 'called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus...' Maybe he's referring back to that amazing encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road when the voice of Christ called him to stop persecuting his people. And maybe he is gently having a go at those who don't rate him in Corinth – he has been called by God! But this word 'call' does not just refer here to Paul. In verse 2 he says of the Christians of Corinth that they are 'called to be saints', and we'll come back to that, but note for now that Paul regards the whole Church at Corinth and all its members as 'called'. And he says something similar in the last verse of our passage when he refers to the Corinthians as 'called' into the fellowship, the *koinonia* of Christ.

So Paul has been called by God, and the church in Corinth has been called by God – as have the individual Christians who make it up. Now this is significant. If we were to do a Bible Study on that word 'called' we might go right back to the very beginning of the Bible, to the Book of Genesis and chapter 1, where God calls creation into being. In Genesis 1 there is a call and then something happens: God says 'let there be light' – and light appears. The call of God creates things, makes

things happen. There's a kind of a dialogue here: God calls and creation responds. And now all that is true of the church too. The church at Corinth was not a human initiative. It wasn't a human 'project'. It wasn't a club set up in Corinth because it needed a church as it might need a golf club. No, God had called the church into being. And of course Paul is being very subtle here: to those who would resist him, to those who had no time for him, he is saying in effect, 'look this isn't my church - it's God's!' It's God's initiative.

And there is something here we need to hear today in this part of the world where the church is in such decline. This is not a human institution. This is not a human project – if it was it would have died out centuries ago. The church is an act of God as much of the very creation itself. And what God calls God sustains and resources, as Paul goes on to say in our passage: God enriches the church – verse 5; he gives gifts to the church, verse 7; he strengthens the church, verse 8. In other words God provides for the church, blessing it with the gifts and the strength of the Spirit and all that we need to respond to God's call. And when we consider the life of our church here the question we need to ask is what is God calling us to be and to do here in the centre of Amsterdam, in the Begijnhof? What is our vocation in the coming year? What is our calling here in this place?

The sense of call, however, applies to us as individual Christians as well. You see, it wasn't just Paul who was called when he fell off his high horse on the Damascus Road. We are all called into faith. And the life of discipleship is not our initiative but a response to the call of Christ: 'Follow me! Call – response; call-response: this is the life of faith.

Indeed we could go further and apply this to human life in general, human existence. Why are we here? Like the creation of the universe described in Genesis 1, human life is not an accident, it is not just chance. Human life is not just a product of random evolution - every human being has been called by God into existence, called by love, and that call awaits our response. And when we lose that sense of vocation, as we are doing now in our rampantly secular age, things go badly awry. The universe is silent. No voice calls us. There is no-one to answer to and so no-one to whom we are accountable. God help us.

Well, you might say that is all about origins – the origin of the Church, the origin of the Christian life, the origins of the universe and human life. But along with origin there is also 'destiny': what we have been called to, the goal of our calling. And here we come to another word in our passage that needs pondering: the word 'saints'. Paul says in verse 2 that we are 'called to be saints'. And what does that mean? Who are saints? Especially if we come from a Roman Catholic background we might associate saints with super holy people: St Paul or St Teresa or whoever. These are people who have led exceptional spiritual lives, people who are super close to God. But that's not the meaning here in Corinthians. Saints here are simply Christians. Paul describes saints here as those who are 'sanctified in Christ' and that means that they are people whose lives are open to the Spirit of God, in whom God's Spirit is at work. But the words 'saint' and 'sanctified' have a particular sense of being set apart, of being in some tension with the world, of being not quite at home in it. 'Saint' has a sense of 'separation'. And that takes us back to the problem in the church in Corinth. What had happened there was nothing less than a dramatic social experiment that challenged the life of the city. In a stratified society marked by status and privilege and moral depravity the church had stood out as an egalitarian community where slaves sat down at table with their owners and where people lived with dignity and respect. There is saintliness for you – a community set apart, different, and where human destiny is realised. But now it was all falling apart. The city of Corinth was reasserting itself over the church in Corinth. Old habits were re-emerging. The tension with the world around was being lost as the Church became just like everyone else. And Paul has to remind them that they are saints, sanctified, destined to be set apart.

Well, maybe that invites us to ask the question as Christians – where are we called to be set apart, to be different? Where are the points of tension with the ways of the world, the ways of the city? You see, Christians are never called to be naysayers, criticising everything going on around them and tutting at this and that. Christians have too often been gloom merchants like that. No! Christians rejoice at all that is good and beautiful and loving in the world and I'm sure the Christians in Corinth celebrated much that was good in the life of their city. But always there is a

tension: to be in the world but not of the world. And a prophetic community is one that identifies and lives out the tension,

Called by God. Called to be saints, set apart. Here is our origin and our destiny. Just one last thing. Our passage says, 'called to be saints – together with all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus.' In this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity let us go on after the service to share *koinonia* with all those in other churches who call on that name. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,
you summon a new day, a new week into being;
you summon the light to banish the darkness
and you call us to awake and to rejoice and praise,
to open our spirits you your Holy Spirit.
We praise you eternal God.
And we praise you that you have called us
to belong to your people,
called us into the community of faith,
the body of Christ that confesses Jesus Christ as Lord.
O God forgive us when we fail you as your church.
Forgive us when our witness is compromised,
when our unity is fractured,
when we simply mirror to the world its brokenness
and we become conformed not to your Spirit
but to the spirit of the age.
O God have mercy upon us, we pray.
Breathe forgiveness over us;
enrich us with your Holy Spirit
and raise us up to new life.
We pray in Jesus' name, and we pray together
In the words he taught us, saying....