

Ultimate and penultimate

Conflict. Division. Quarrels: the story of life in the church at Corinth according our reading this morning. And as I indicated last week when we began this series on Paul's letter to the Corinthians, this was profoundly disheartening to the great Christian missionary Paul who had founded the church about five years previously. What he had established and nurtured there was a remarkable social experiment which broke the mould of the city in which the church was set. The key to the life in the church in Corinth is best expressed by a Greek word, *koininia*, often translated 'fellowship' but which has a sense of deep loyalty, commitment and community between people who would otherwise be strangers to each other, locked into hierarchies, pecking orders and divisions. Here in the church in Corinth, a new unity and equality had been forged by the liberating Spirit of God.

Now, however, it is all going wrong. There are divisions and factions in the church. People are pledging allegiance to different leaders – some to a man called Apollos, others to Peter, some to Paul himself. Paul is horrified. It is, he says, as if Christ himself has been divided up. And Paul's entire letter to the church is really a plea to rediscover *koinonia*, to recapture this liberated pattern of life that so contrasted with the divided and hierarchical city of Corinth.

Well, what an appropriate text for this Sunday that brings to a close The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Christ commanded his disciples that they should be one. He said the world would judge whether or not God sent Jesus on the basis of his followers' unity. And that's troubling because the Church of Jesus Christ has all too often echoed the Church of Corinth: 'I'm a Protestant!', 'I'm a Roman Catholic!', 'I'm a Presbyterian!', 'I'm a Methodist!', 'I'm an evangelical!', 'I'm a liberal'... and so on and on.' And Christians have tortured and killed each other mercilessly in devotion to their particular faction.

You may have been aware of the death last week of the writer and comedian Terry Jones, a founder member of the surreal comedy show, Monty Python's Flying Circus. Terry Jones directed and wrote much of the film 'Life of Brian' which the Men's Group are watching this week. Jones' death prompted recollections of how he and the Monty Python team had the idea of writing a comedy about the life of Christ, so they all went away to read the Gospels. When they did, however, they concluded that there was really nothing laughable or absurd about Jesus. What was laughable and absurd was his followers and what they did to his message – hence The Life of Brian. Christians have taken Christ's profound message of reconciliation and sown the seeds of division and intolerance, to our shame.

And of course just as the Church in Corinth came to reflect rather than to challenge the city of Corinth, so the church comes to reflect the broken and fragmented world that we live in – a world divided politically, divided culturally, divided religiously, divided economically: fractured along every conceivable fault-line. And I want this morning just to pick out two features of our world which threaten conflict and division. The first is nationalism. Those like me who come from the UK are particularly aware of two nationalist voices that are currently fairly strident there: look at the map of the UK after the recent General Election and you see Scotland dominated by the Scottish National Party and England dominated by the pro-Brexit Conservative Party which has campaigned to 'take back control' and to recapture that Churchillian national spirit that saw us through the war. And across the Atlantic a President trumpets Make America Great Again and pursues a raft of protectionist policies that appeal to a nationalist spirit. And elsewhere around the world nationalist sympathies are on the rise, to some degree in reaction to globalisation and the increasing blurring of national boundaries and identities. The ascent of nationalism is surely a feature of our times.

But the other phenomenon which is also a threat to unity and community is what we have come to call 'identity politics'. Some of us are old enough to recall the liberation movements of the '60s and the '70s: the rise of feminism, the demand for equal rights for ethnic minorities, the demand for equality for what is now known as the LGBTQ community, the demand for justice for the disabled. All this has led to a heightened awareness of how society can be oppressive when it is

cast in the image of one dominant group – be it white, male, straight, able-bodied or old. And of course this has led to something of a social revolution where people identify not in traditional categories of left and right or along traditional political party lines or even along nationalistic lines: they identify according to their particular experience of oppression. And this has often led to a shrill and confrontational stance against anyone who is deemed to have transgressed these zones of liberation – they are outed and often vilified on social media and defined solely in terms of their transgression. So, for example, in the current US presidential election Senator Joe Biden has been vociferously exposed for votes he cast decades ago on certain desegregation policies, and he is labelled now by some as a closet racist, despite his very strong support among black voters. Suddenly the world echoes with a conflicting Babel of oppressed voices – voices of victims who are determined that they will be victims no longer and sometimes insisting that their oppression is worse than anyone else's. I recall once in the United States attending a lecture in which a professor argued that racism was America's original sin: and afterwards women, some of them in tears, were haranguing him for prioritising racism over sexism. So new alliances are formed based on the experience of oppression and marginalisation, and traditional groupings and alliances are reconfigured and it seems that politics will never be the same again.

So what are we as Christians to say of all this? Have we anything to say? Well, let's take the issue of nationalism. In some quarters this is a dirty word, but actually there is a strong affirmation of nations and nationhood in the Bible. In the Book of Genesis God creates nations as part of the ordering of the world, and national characteristics and cultures are part of the richness of creation. And on the Day of Pentecost people in Jerusalem hear languages from all over the world being spoken – there is not one universal language but a rich diversity of tongues and accents. And in the Book of Revelation people from every tribe and tongue are pictured around the throne of God and there is no suggestion that national characteristics are eclipsed or that all cultural colours bleed into one. And if there is an argument for having national flags in church – and that's debateable! – it is that flags represent the diversity of God's good world - and the more the merrier!

Similarly, in regard to identity politics, many Christians will thank God for the liberation movements of recent decades: the exposure of covert oppression. Anyone who believes in sin will recognise how sin infects human structures and institutions, and anyone who understands salvation will rejoice to see the dismantling of unjust, oppressive structures and practices.

For Christians, however, there is one caveat – and here I want to make a distinction between what is ultimate and what is penultimate: in other words what matters above all, and what is of secondary importance. Take the example of nationalism. I am passionate about Scotland and last night I rejoiced to celebrate the poetry of Scotland's national poet, Robert Burns, here at our Burns evening. As a Christian I cherish and thank God for all that is distinctive of Scotland. But ultimately – ultimately - in terms of nationality I belong not to Scotland but to God's holy nation where Christ rules. So when I sign a visitors' book and am asked to stipulate my nationality I take great joy in writing 'Christian' for that is my ultimate nationality. Scottish or any other national identity is affirmed by the Gospel – but it is affirmed as secondary, penultimate. And it's when it becomes ultimate that it becomes dangerous.

Similarly in terms of my faith, I know why I am Protestant and Presbyterian and there are features of that church polity which I value over others. But God is far too big to be confined to one denomination, one tradition. And I understand why in Corinth some people aligned with Apollos and others with Paul because we all have our favourite teachers and mentors. But the Corinthians needed to be reminded that these are secondary, penultimate loyalties and their ultimate allegiance is to Christ who transcends all these and in whom we find our unity.

So too, with identity politics. It may be that your experience as a woman or as a minority has brought you great grief, and life is still far too often a struggle. And you refuse to be the victim of an oppressive world where what is essential to being you is demeaned or patronised or rejected. And so you fight back and God bless you in your resistance! But the Gospel is that your true identity lies elsewhere. Your identity as a woman or as a minority lies ultimately in your relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Everything else is penultimate, secondary. And in that

relationship with God through Christ all that you are is affirmed and all that is denied to you is upheld and you become truly you. And, remember: the Christ in whom you find your true self was himself a victim of the oppressive system, and that system tried to crush him, but he rose above it. And in relationship with him therefore you are bound in love with the one who defeated the system. That is the power of the cross. That is the power of a crucified Saviour. He was a victim of the system but he rose and triumphed over it and escaped its clutches. And in relationship with him therefore the identities of the oppressed are safe and secure. And so our passage ends on a defiant note: the cross of Christ will not be emptied of its power!

So we return to our familiar world: the world of Corinth and the world familiar to us today – a conflicted world where loyalties and identities clash and become the cause of conflict and division. But we return too to Paul’s vision of the church: a space where oppressor and oppressed can sit down together peaceably at the table of fellowship, *koinonia*. And together we can affirm the penultimate and the wonderful variety and diversity of God’s good world and all the difference that it contains. But we also celebrate the ultimate – the living God in whom we find our unity and in whose Christ our liberation and our true selves are to be found. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,
 all praise and honour and glory be to you,
 sovereign God, ruler over all.
 You have created the world in such variety and diversity:
 nations and tribes and tongues
 with their cultures and traditions:
 all that enriches the life of the world.
 And such diversity reflects you, the Maker,
 you who are infinite in life and love and grace,
 endlessly creative and generative.
 And you hold all that variety together,
 binding into unity all that is different
 in one loving embrace.
 O God forgive us for how we divide your world,
 bringing conflict and hostility;
 Forgive us for imposing uniformity
 and for stifling difference;
 forgive us for the ways we violate the peace
 and harmony of your creation.
 And forgive us that the same conflicts and divisions
 starfish even the Church, the Body of Christ.
 Lord, have mercy upon us and forgive us.
 Keep faith with us even when we fail;
 Send your Spirit of peace, reconciliation
 And lead us into new life:
 We pray in Jesus’ name and we pray together
 In the words her taught us, saying...