



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A

Christian Unity Week

Readings: Isaiah 8:23-9:3, Ps 26, 1 Corinthians 1: 10-13, 17, Matthew 4: 12-23

It is no accident that, in the weeks surrounding the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity the Church begins her study of St. Paul's First Letter to the Church in Corinth. Last week I said much about Corinth and I do not intend to reprise it here except to remind you that it was a rich, successful and deeply corrupt city.

Paul had spent 18 months there, preaching and teaching, and was now shocked and disappointed to discover, from reports, that the Church in Corinth was wracked with factionalism. They were falling out over belief and practice and fighting like rats in a sack. Worse still they were dignifying these splits and mini schisms by attributing it to loyalty to various teachers and Apostles.

As Paul records, one group is claiming loyalty to Paul, another to Peter, another to the powerful preacher Apollos, another for Christ Himself as if these great figures of the Faith were equals and opposites at odds with each other. Paul is, as ever, direct and to the point.

First of all, in the very opening shot of this letter, he points out that they are not the Church of Corinth but the Church of God in Corinth! There is not a series of churches with pick and mix spirituality setting their own agenda and choosing their own priests and teachers according to preferred flavour and content. That is not the Church. That is congregationalism and it is a noxious weed in the garden of truth.

Second the teachers to whom the various factions attach themselves – ‘I like Fr. Peter – he’s a kind man, he never corrects me’ – ‘I like Fr. Paul, he tells it like it is’ – ‘I’m for Fr. Apollos, he’s a better preacher than the other two sings the Mass beautifully’ – Paul dismisses. How dare they put any of them on a par with Jesus. ‘Is Christ divided?’, Paul demands to know. ‘Were you baptised in the name of Paul?’ ‘Was Paul crucified for you?’

Put as starkly as that such divisions are revealed for the dangerous nonsense that they truly are. Division in the Church of God is a scandal and an impediment to the Gospel.

We live in the wake of a turbulent history of division. The ancient schism of Eastern Christendom still diminishes the Universal Church and reverberates through every aspect of secular foreign policy to this day. The choices of our present day leaders, though most of them do not know it, are born of the eleventh century spat that saw Cardinal Humbert walk away from Constantinople and later disastrous diversion of the Fourth Crusade and the sacking of the great city and the unhealed enmity of the East. It is no accident that Pope St. John Paul II devoted much of his ecumenical energy to this primary fault line.

In the West we live with the rancorous and unending sub-divisions of Protestantism – every man a pope in his own front room. These days we do not seek to burn or disembowel one another so there is progress and we should be grateful. But, while accepting one another in good will, that does not mean either accepting the status quo or the long heritage of theological error that has led to it and the consequent weakening of the mission.

And here again we turn to Paul and his great call for unity. It is not insignificant that, in the first ten verses of this letter, Paul mentions Jesus ten times.

Paul is called to be an Apostle by Jesus.

The Christians at Corinth are sanctified in Christ Jesus.

They are called to be saints along with ‘all those who in every place call upon Jesus – their Lord and ours’.

Paul’s greeting of grace and peace is a greeting from Jesus

Paul prays for the Corinthian Christians, grateful for God’s gift to them of Jesus. The Greek says, ‘He eucharists’ for them. He offers Mass.

He reminds them that the Gospel of Jesus was confirmed in them.

They are, with the saints, waiting for the coming of Jesus.

Jesus will defend them in the Day of Judgement.

They were called into the fellowship, the loving community of Jesus.

It is, therefore, in Jesus’ name that Paul commands an end to factionalism and partiality and personality dispute and personal preference.

That is not a first century clarion call. That is God’s Word for His people for all time. So where does that leave us, brothers and sisters?

It is my personal experience that the place in which most productive ecumenical healing work is done is not in endless well-meaning but utterly

tedious committee meetings, nor in painful boded together lowest common denominator para-liturgies. The work of unity is at its most powerful in the mission field. If we have a heart for Jesus then, working with others who also love the Lord, is what most powerfully overcomes our mutual suspicions and leads to real encounter and a deeper understanding. Don't get me wrong. I believe the Catholic Church to be the Universal Church (as a one man ecumenical movement passing from unbelief to Baptist Sunday School and Anglican ministry before finally making it home, I know the journey). But I also know that there are a lot of people out there who truly love the Lord Jesus but don't know His Body, the Church. Who don't understand the mysterious gift of Reconciliation. Who never receive the Sacraments on their pilgrimage. Who are unaware of the Communion of Saints. Who are missing from our family table.

We long for and pray for an united Church – one Church, the Church of Jesus. If people are to see this and come home then:

- 1 We must not be afraid to mission together in Jesus' name
- 2 If they come to our church they must be struck by the centrality of Jesus
- 3 As they spend time with us they should witness in our lives that love for Jesus

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is a good time to take stock of our part in the mission. To reflect on whether our worship is really the best we can offer Jesus. To kneel humbly before Him and ask Him to rekindle, on the altar of our heart, that fire of love which draw others home.