

Year A, Proper 3, 22 January 2023

Sue's reflection on Paul's first letter to the Corinthians 1:10-18

I wonder what thoughts went through your mind as you listened to the reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians?

It certainly rang bells for me - even 2000 years later, Christians seem to be divided in how they worship and in the details of their beliefs. Paul's letter reflects a concern in one of the earliest ever Christian congregations. Different church sects were already forming based on preferences for different leaders. Paul seems to be exasperated and warns them of the dangers of putting out a mixed message of the Gospel. He's urging them to be of one mind, one belief, reminding them that Christ is not divided and as Christians, nor should they be.

Paul's letter addresses a relatively small local congregation. Maybe like ours. Paul asks that "all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought."

But that's quite a big ask, isn't it?

Paul's words describe an ideal - a concept of congregational perfection.

Is it possible for any congregation to achieve this?

If we're absolutely honest, I don't think so. How can we possibly all think and believe exactly the same things within our faith?

Even here at St James, there are some of us who believe in the nativity story as a literal history, and others believe it's allegorical. We have lots of individual interpretations of the miracles, and we even have different ideas about why Jesus was crucified.

But it's one of the things that attracts me to St James - the huge variability between us in our beliefs and expressions of Faith. And the way that we are encouraged to read, to learn, to think, to fathom things out through the Faith Development activities that Nick provides for us.

When I first sang with the choir here, it was because I'd joined in as a visitor with "Music for a Summer Evening" that we used to do, and I enjoyed it so much I thought I needed to give something back by supporting the music in the services. My faith was very weak - and there were chunks of the service that I couldn't join in with at that time because I simply didn't believe the words that I was supposed to be saying. It bothered me a lot. So, I had a chat with Rob Warren, the Rector at the time, to let him know what a fraud I was.

His response was that it was fine. We're all at different places on the faith journey. If Rob had told me, "Oh dear, you don't think and believe the same as the rest of us" - then that would have been the end of it for me. But of course, he wouldn't say that.

And throughout Lynsay's time with us, and now Nick's, I've only met with encouragement to think things out for myself and to rein in my panic if someone believes something radically different to what I believe.

Because after all, who is right? My own beliefs feel good to me, but they might feel almost blasphemous to someone else in the congregation - and vice versa.

Paul's point is that the unity of mind and purpose he seeks for the church comes from their shared connection to one another through baptism, and their efforts to look in the same direction towards God, not towards religious leaders.

I think St Paul would be in despair over modern global divisions between Christian faiths, and over those whose literal belief in every word of the bible makes them forget to love their neighbour, whoever that might be.

And would St Paul be in despair at our motley crew here at St James?

I hope not. At the moment, I think he would see that in spite of our differences in views, belief, worship preferences, etc., he would see us united in our baptism, bringing our different gifts to do God's work in whatever way we can, and he would recognize our efforts to follow the two great commandments given to us by Jesus - to love the Lord our God, and to love our neighbour - however different they may be from us, welcoming all to our church as their spiritual home.

Joy's reflection the gospel reading, from John 1 v 14

'He made his home among us'

The phrase I picked up from the Gospel reading this morning was that *Jesus left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea*. In Estate Agents' speak, Capernaum was in a beautiful setting on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was adjacent to a main trade route running from what we now call Syria into northern Palestine, and, although a small community, had a synagogue.

But why did Jesus make his home in Capernaum? According to Luke's gospel, Jesus began his mission in his hometown of Nazareth. He preached in the synagogue there, saying that he was the one that God had promised to send to help and heal them. Their response was to drag him out of the town and consider throwing him down the hill to his death. So he left Nazareth and walked further north and west till he came to the Sea of Galilee.

As Jesus walked along the foreshore of the lake, he met Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, and then, a bit further up the beach, James and John. All four were fishermen and responded to Jesus's call to follow him and become fishers of men. They came from Capernaum. On the next Sabbath, they all went to the synagogue and then returned to Peter's home where his wife offered them hospitality.

When we visited Capernaum a few years ago, we had a Jewish guide who explained to us that it was a regular custom in his home for his mother to invite any visitors to their synagogue to share the Sabbath meal with them; and that there was always, almost miraculously, enough food to go round.

HOME is where I started; it implies more than just a structure. When I was a census officer in 1971, one of the questions asked if the people living in the property regularly shared their meals together; if the answer was yes, then they would be counted as family, not just a visitor.

Jesus didn't just come to live in Capernaum, he made it his HOME. He became a member of Peter's extended family and they in return became part of his family – the Christian family here on earth. We can ask Jesus into our homes, welcome the stranger amongst us, just as Simon Peter and his wife did. Think of the parable at the end of Matthew's gospel, where Jesus says: *whenever you welcomed the stranger into your home you welcomed me*. By the entrance to the archaeological site of Capernaum, they have put a statue of a man wrapped in a blanket asleep on a park bench.

Home implies welcome, friendship, shelter, and hospitality. It also means, when joining with our wider Christian family in worship, a consideration for the feelings and attitudes of our fellow worshipers. As Sue described for us, the first century congregation in Corinth had to learn this and we do too; we all have our own way to approach our faith, but as individuals we have to recognise that none of us are the holders of the ultimate truth.

Let's pray that Christ can make his home among us here in St James the Less, and help us to be a warm, welcoming and open-minded space. And as individuals we welcome in this Christmas season Christ into our lives.

The hymn that came to mind while I was writing this was one that links us to Christmas, the season we are still celebrating when Jesus became human and came to make his HOME among us in a stable in Bethlehem. He continues to be with us now in 2023.

*Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown
when Thou camest to earth for me;
But in Bethlehem's home was there found no room
for Thy earthly nativity.
Oh come to my heart, Lord Jesus,
there is room in my heart for Thee.*