

## **3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Epiphany, Year A**

**1 Corinthians 1.10-18 • Matthew 4.12-23**

**St Luke's, Chelsea**

**26 January 2023**

**Sam Hole**

“Be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” (1 Cor 1.10b)

May I speak...

Among Jesus's parting words to his disciples in John's gospel are some memorable words. 'By this shall all know that you are my disciples, / If you have love one to another', as they are rendered in one modern hymn.

It's a hymn that would have felt rather false in the Corinthian church to which Paul writes in today's New Testament reading. In the verses we have heard, taken from almost the very beginning of the letter, Paul decries the divisions that have arisen in that small community. Different groups are claiming allegiance to various leaders – to Paul, to Apollos, to Cephas, to Christ. To which Paul urges: 'set your divisions aside'. Be united in the same mind and the same purpose. How, we might imagine Paul thinking, are the Corinthians to be the body of Christ if they are divided? And, absent any signs of love for one another, how will all the world know that these people are disciples of Christ?

Paul appeals to the Corinthians for unity. And I would agree with Paul. Our divisions as Christians – divisions across denominations, divisions within denominations, divisions within congregations – our divisions are a scandal, an open wound in the Body of Christ. How, in the face of the anger, hurt, distrust and upset that such divisions generate – how shall all know that we are disciples of the living and loving God?

And there is one particular division which has loomed especially large in the Church of England this week. For six years the church has engaged in an exercise it has called Living in Love and Faith, as an attempt to find a way forward on the fraught questions around sexuality, notably the question of same-sex marriage. You might remember that in early 2021 we, like many other parishes, held a discussion group on the subject which fed its reflections back to the

national process. This national process has sought to give time for people to listen to one another; to look at scripture with fresh eyes; to ponder where they see the fruit of the Spirit.

This week, the bishops of the Church of England announced their plans for a way forward. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, it's an announcement that has been greeted with both welcome and dismay. Given that many of us will have seen the half-digested national media coverage, or may end up in conversations with friends and family about the subject, I want to say a little about what has been proposed.

What is planned is as follows. First, same-sex marriage will continue not to be allowed. It will, however, be permissible for clergy to lead services of dedication, thanksgiving and asking for God's blessing. Second, those putting themselves forward for ordained ministry will no longer need to signal their acceptance of a document written in 1991, a document whose understanding of what it called 'homophilia' was a long way from the situation today. Finally, Archbishops of Canterbury and York have issued an apology to LGBTQI+ people for the "rejection, exclusion and hostility" they have faced in churches and the impact this has had on their lives'.<sup>1</sup>

The changes are hardly radical. Indeed, on the question of same-sex marriage they are virtually no change at all from what clergy have in recent years been allowed to do – except that there are now official Church of England liturgies being offered for the service.

Why so little change? Well, in part the decision mirrored many bishops' own theological positions. It reflects the high concern of the bishops to preserve some kind of unity within the Church of England. But above all, the proposal reflects political realities. Any acceptance of same-sex marriage in church or the introduction of blessings of same-sex civil marriages would be, in legal terms, a change in the doctrine of the Church of England. It would therefore need to be presented to General Synod and approved by that body by a two-thirds majority – and the numbers are simply not there in Synod for such a change. The Bishops therefore resort to claim that the new prayers they offer simply ask for God's blessing on the couple, rather than pronouncing a blessing on them (like I would at the end of a service – 'The blessing of God...') – and that the prayers accordingly do not change the church's doctrine. The linguistic and theological logic of the claim is questionable. But

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/press-releases/bishops-propose-prayers-thanksgiving-dedication-and-gods-blessing>

since according to the bishops these new prayers represent no change in the church's doctrine, the bishops can authorise the new liturgies without even needing the approval of Synod.

Some in the Church of England have welcomed the proposed changes as a good step. Others worry that the acceptance of this new position as the probable settlement for the next two or three decades is hardly signalling an end to the rejection and exclusion of those who are LGBTQI+. And at the same time a sizeable minority still opposes any change to the church's current – and as they see it, correct – position on sexuality.

We too in this congregation will have different responses to what has been announced. I for one mourn that the Church of England has not gone further. The new plans represent little change from what has been possible up to now, and will likely continue the pain of many friends. Gay clergy friends also wait to see whether the Church of England will allow them to enter civil marriages rather than simply civil partnerships, and whether the Church will drop its expectation that they remain celibate in such partnerships.

And our official parish position of support for change is much the same. Our parish is a signed-up member of the organisation Inclusive Church, which seeks to challenge all kinds of discrimination within the church – be that on grounds, say, of disability, ethnicity, economic power, gender, gender identity or sexuality. And for many of us here there may well be a sense of bafflement at the church's muddle on this issue, or feelings of frustration and anger at its ongoing lack of resolution.

And yet of course we recognise that to be an inclusive parish also demands the inclusion of a wide range of views, including those who do not want to see any change in the position that has been held by the church for many centuries, a view which in great faithfulness and humility continues to be held by many, many Christians. One of the privileges of our reflection group last year was to hear voices both in favour of and opposing change listening with charity to one another. I know such respectful listening will need to continue. And I know, too, that we must all share in a deep sadness at the ongoing division that bedevils the shared life of the Church of England.

On this issue, as on so many issues that divide the Body of Christ, there is no easy sign of a way forward. And indeed, Paul himself seems to recognise something of this in his words to the Christians in Corinth. 'For', as the last line of our extract reads, 'the message about

the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.' The wisdom of the world is the way of viewing life that is structured by competing powers, by win-lose situations, by the division that results. In the cross, by contrast, we see the power of God – the power that is exemplified in the weakness and suffering of Christ for the sake of the world. The cross is the path from death to life, from brokenness to wholeness, from self-serving division to holiness and relationship – if we will walk the long path of learning its wisdom. This is the path that Paul urges the Corinthians to tread, if they are to come together again. I wonder if it is the only viable path for us too.

This Wednesday, the church celebrates the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul – that mysterious event on the road to Damascus. The preceding 7 days – a period which we are in the middle of – have for over a century been marked as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. So we pray for a reunion of the historic schisms – between the Christianity of East and West, between Catholic and Protestant, between the denominations in our own nation. But we also pray for unity, and for love for one another, between Christians in our own Church of England.

When in our gospel reading Peter and Andrew, James and John, set down their nets and followed Christ, little did they know where it would lead them – but they knew it was the path of life. May we too have the courage to walk in the wisdom of the cross, and to discover the reconciling power of God.

A prayer, from the words of our offertory hymn:

For all thy Church, O Lord, we intercede;

make thou our sad divisions soon to cease;

draw us the nearer each to each, we plead,

by drawing all to thee, O Prince of Peace:

thus may we all one Bread, one Body be,

one through this Sacrament of unity.

Amen.