

Weakness, power and unity

*Wilson Poon, St. Peter's, Luton Place, Edinburgh, 23rd January 2011
(Week of Prayer for Christian Unity)*

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Eighteen months was a very long time to stay in one place for an itinerant preacher like Paul. But that was how long he stayed in Corinth at his first visit. Corinth was special for Paul – it was the place he first met power, *real* power.

A few months before he arrived in Corinth, Paul thought he had a vision from God telling him to cross over to the Province of Macedonia to preach the gospel there, which he did. But then everything went pear shaped. He was hounded out city after city: Philippi, Thessalonica and Beroea, making but a very few converts in each. His friends from Beroea had to smuggle him out of Macedonia all together. Then, at the university city of Athens, he was laughed out of court by the intellectuals. Was it all a big mistake? Did he misinterpret an idle dream as a vision from God? It was in this frame of mind that Paul arrived in Corinth. Listen to his words in 1 Corinthians 2:3 –

I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.

But that was precisely the kind of apostle that God could best use. God worked mightily through Paul's weakness in Corinth, where Paul learnt the deep truth that God used weak vessels precisely so that

the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power' (1:18).

When Paul left Corinth after 18 months, he left behind a thriving congregation. He was entirely clear that the Corinthian church did *not* owe its existence to his power as a preacher, but to the power of God. As he was to say later in 2 Corinthians:

We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. (2 Cor. 4:7)

From now on, every time Paul thinks of the Corinthian congregation, he would be reminded of this deep and paradoxical truth – that God's power is made perfect in our weakness. The name of this 'power in weakness',

shown most clearly at the cross, is 'love'. So it is not surprising that it was in 1 Corinthians that Paul gave us the hymn to love; 1 Corinthians Chapter 13, beginning at verse 4:

Love is patient; love is kind ... [love] does not insist on its own way ...

and so on, until the well known climax:

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

For a sermon at the beginning of the week of prayer for Christian unity, it is important to recall that these incomparable words were written by Paul to a church that was anything but united. Indeed, Chapter 13 follows two whole chapters in which Paul ticked off the Corinthian congregation for the divisions manifested in their worship meetings. They bicker at the Eucharist, they bicker about who should say what when, they bicker about the singing; they bicker about the whole shebang. You can read about these things in Chapters 11 and 12.

But you don't have to wait until Chapters 11 and 12 to learn about disunity in Corinth. Right at the beginning of the letter, after just a few words of introduction, Paul lost no time in getting down to this matter:

It has been reported to me ... that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. ... each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.' (1:11-12)

'I belong to Paul.' Paul stands for freedom from the shackles of tradition – circumcision and the whole ritualistic law is out; eating meat that has been offered to idols is not a problem; anything is allowed, because Christ has set us free.

'I belong to Cephas.' Cephas, or Peter, who, on the contrary, stands for tradition. Circumcision, not eating pork, ritualistic hand washing before meals; it's all in the bible, and we've done it like this since time immemorial, so we should do it like this until the immemorial future.

'I belong to Apollo.' He's the guy with a PhD from the University of Alexandria (see Acts 18:24ff), the Oxford or Cambridge of the Mediterranean. For his followers, the church is never intellectual enough. They want a theology reading group!

And then there are those who stand aloof from it all, and proclaim that instead of following such personality cults, 'We belong to Christ.' In other words, 'We are the *real* Christians. We don't care about any of the stuff that *you* lot bicker about. We want to get on with the real business of the church,' whatever that may be.

I wonder whether these factions in Corinth ring any bells for us today. The tragedy is that each faction's favourite point of view has its validity. But these points of view have become exclusive obsessions in Corinth, so they quarrel and rip the church apart, quite forgetting that 'love does not insist on its own way.'

Why? Why has this happened? Paul did not leave them in this state after his 18-month stay. Indeed, he was *very* careful not to do anything that would cause such division:

I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (1:14-15)

So what has happened to lead to this state of affairs? Paul's diagnosis is that they have all taken their eyes off the ball – they are no longer focussed on Jesus Christ; verse 10 of our passage:

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, *by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you.

Paul gives the Corinthians three grounds for unity. First, they are *brothers and sisters*. Secondly, Christ is whole – that is why he exasperatedly asks the Corinthians, 'Has Christ been divided?' (1:13) Later he would argue that the church is the body of Christ; Christ's body is whole, so the church should be united. For the present, however, Paul focuses on a third imperative for unity. The church must be united 'so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.' (1:17b)

Such unity is *not* a matter of uniformity. Later on Paul uses the metaphor of a body to argue for diversity – a body has, and needs, a diversity of body parts working together. Moreover, achieving such unity is *not* a matter of sweeping things under the carpet and pretending that everything is OK. In verse 10, Paul asks the Corinthians that they should be 'be united in the same mind and purpose.' A more literal translation is that they should be 'restored' to the same mind and purpose. The word I translate as 'restore' is used to describe the mending of nets by fishermen and the resetting of bones by doctors. No quick brushing under the carpet,

but hard slog, because what is needed is an inner unity of ‘mind and purpose’, and such unity is not to be had without a great deal of prayer, repentance, reconciliation, study and discussion. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians was meant to start them on this road.

This is the beginning of the week of prayer for Christian unity, and unity, like charity, begins at home. So, how are we at St. Peter’s doing on the unity front? What would Paul say to us if he were to appear in our midst? Would he commend us for being united ‘in mind and purpose’? Or would he rather detect a party of Paul, a party of Cephas and a party of Christ? That is the question that our reading is asking us as a congregation today.

It is a dangerous question to ask of any congregation. For if we take it seriously and start to answer it, we may find ourselves broken to pieces in the process. But as Paul learnt at Corinth 2000 years ago, such brokenness is the occasion of God’s power. Indeed, he wrote 1 Corinthians to bring the church at Corinth to this point of brokenness so that God could work in them to restore the unity of mind and purpose.

Do we care enough to invite God to work in this way in our midst? If we don’t, then the memorial of Christ’s death that we will enact in a few minutes’ time will be no more than a beautiful ritual. On the other hand, if we do care enough to invite God to work in our midst, then the act of kneeling together to partake of the tokens of Christ’s death may yet prove to be the start of a brokenness that becomes the occasion of God’s power: the people that walk in darkness will surely see a great light. Let us pray:

From heaven you came, helpless babe
Into our world your glory veiled
Not to be served but to serve
And give your life that we might live.

So teach us all how to serve
And in our life enthrone him
Each others needs to prefer
For it is Christ we are serving.

This is our God, the servant king
Who calls us now to follow him
To bring our lives as a daily offering
Of worship to the servant king.

Amen.