

The situation which St Paul addresses in our NT passage today is one which, sadly, most church members have experienced at some time in their faith journey. It's the problem of division and conflict within a local congregation.

St Paul's is really frustrated as he addresses the factional conflict occurring in the church at Corinth. Speaking to the different factions he asks: 'Has Christ been divided? 'Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?' These are rhetorical questions but they're put with quite some feeling and I think there are two related reasons why Paul feels such dismay.

We all know that disharmony and conflict is not good for any organisation, it sabotages the smooth running and the effectiveness of the organisation and the morale of its people, and it's the same for churches. But for Paul, conflict in the church creates a more fundamental problem, because in Paul's understanding, the local church is to be living sign of the Kingdom of God. To put that another way, for Paul the nature and purpose of the local church is to be a sacrament of the Kingdom of God – it is to be an outward and visible sign of the inward and invisible grace of the Kingdom. This is the connection between the proclamation of the Kingdom of God by Jesus in the gospels and the emphasis on the nature and role of the church in the rest of the New Testament. Now, if a local church, in this case the church in Corinth, slides into being simply a reflection of the pagan society in which it's set, then it's betraying its very nature and undermining its mission. That's one reason why Paul is so passionate. Yes, conflict causes disharmony and dysfunction in the church but even worse, it is a betrayal of its nature and mission and undermines its witness to Jesus and his kingdom.

Before we get into the second reason for Paul's distress about the situation at Corinth, I want to speak briefly about the difference between conflict and

disagreement. Hang in with me on this because I think it's relevant to what was happening in Corinth, and what we can learn from that.

Church members, as you're all well aware, can disagree over any number of things, from styles of church music to more complicated issues such as their stance on the blessing of same sex unions, but even though some issues are quite complex, they don't need to result in conflict. Constructive disagreement is important for the health of a church. Conflict, however, is different animal altogether. Conflict occurs when our opinion on an issue becomes so important to us that a challenge to that opinion is perceived as personally threatening – or to put that another way it's perceived as a threat to our worth as a person. When that happens, our need to restore our sense of self often overrides the need to resolve the disagreement and the need to maintain good relationships and when that happens, conflict breaks out, and conflict is usually destructive of community.

Now, all of us get our sense of personal worth from quite a few sources but, as Christians, the most basic and important source of our sense of self is that which we have in Christ, and particularly in Christ crucified for us. We are people who have been died for and that fact confers an infinite worth on each of us. And this conferred worth doesn't depend on us, on how clever or good looking we are, it doesn't matter if we get things wrong from time to time, as we all do, me included. It's a worth that, in God's love, is conferred on us, a God given worth that nothing can take away. And all we need to do is to recognise this conferred worth, to accept it by faith and live it out in our lives. First and foremost, then, as Christians, we discover and grow into a secure sense of personal worth as we come to faith in our crucified saviour.

If we turn back now, to the situation in Corinth, Paul is clearly distressed about what he's hearing about church members shouting at each other and touting slogans like

'I belong to Apollos' or 'I belong to Cephas', and he's horrified that some should say 'I belong to Paul' and even more by those, probably belonging to a super-spiritual group, who loftily proclaim 'I belong to Christ.' What's in view here is probably a dispute about who has the most spiritual wisdom, but that they enlist in such factions, and engage in such conflict, is evidence for Paul that the Corinthians have forgotten who they are in Christ – they have somehow forgotten that their identity and their worth as brothers and sisters in Christ is underpinned by faith in the Christ who was crucified for them. In reality they have drifted away from the truth of the gospel and lost themselves in wayward thinking and disputes which contradict their faith in Christ and undermine the nature and mission of the church. Put simply, they've lost the plot – and this is the second reason Paul is so concerned.

There's little doubt that much of what was happening in the church in Corinth was due to the influence of the surrounding culture. Corinth was a cosmopolitan city in which social esteem was gained by one's ability to demonstrate superior wisdom and sophisticated speech; and aggressive self-promotion was not only acceptable but expected, and boasting, factions, and disputation were the norm. The problem was that while church was in Corinth, a very negative part of Corinth was in the church. Churches today, ours included, need to be aware of this pervasive tendency to import negative cultural values into the life of the church.

Paul's remedy for the problems at Corinth, and for similar problems in churches today, is to take drifting churches back to the foundational message of the gospel. Earlier he had urged them to *be knit together in the same mind and the same purpose*, now he gives them the basis, the foundation, for the unity he's calling for and he emphasises for them, that it's not about eloquence or sophistication, or about who baptised who, it's about the power of God which is revealed to us and for us at the cross. So he writes:

*Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel—and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. <sup>18</sup> For 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.*

There's a sober reminder here that in ancient Corinth there were those who, either through their active opposition to it or their indifference to it, regarded the message of the cross as foolishness. The same is true of many people today. Most of the people I talk to would hesitate to say that the Christian message is foolishness, that seems too extreme, but their indifference really signals their view of its truth and thus its irrelevance to them. The thing is, the message of the cross is either true or it is foolish, and if it's true it's relevant to everyone, so really a decision is called for.

Our passage confronts us with the uncomfortable truth that those, then and now, who regard the Christian message as foolishness effectively exclude themselves from all that God offers through the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Paul describes such people as 'those who are perishing.' This sounds harsh to our ears but we should be careful about jumping to conclusions. What the word 'perishing' means is not defined here or in the other places it occurs in the NT. The root meaning of the Greek word has the sense of 'something lost' – and here it's in the present tense, so it's 'something being lost' – so it must, I think, refer to a losing out here and now on the riches God offers through the cross, although it must be said that a continuing rejection of the message of the cross will, of course, have future consequences. On both counts we need to think about our responsibilities as a church and as individuals, to share the message of the cross as effectively as we can.

The main message here, though, is addressed to those members of the Corinthian church who, no doubt under the pressure of cultural expectation, had drifted away

from the cross as the foundation for their lives and in doing so had forgotten who they are in Christ. Paul reminds them and us that for 'us who are being saved' the cross is the power of God.

The cross brings to 'us who are being saved' free and full forgiveness, it offers to us reconciliation with God and with each other, it opens the way to a new life in Christ, a life liberated from the power and penalty of sin, a life lived under the direction and thus the blessing of the Holy Spirit, a life which is not rendered meaningless by death or the threat of death because, through the cross we share in Christ's victory over sin and death – a victory which is, of course, underpinned by the truth of the resurrection of Jesus. Each one of these aspects of the power of God offered to us through the cross could be the subject of a sermon – or two – and each of them speaks to us of the cross as the power of God for us who are being saved. The cross and the experience of its power in our lives assures us that we are loved, deeply loved, by God and that God is faithful and that no circumstances can separate us from that love, including when we feel under threat. *'I am convinced,'* Paul writes as he reflects on the cross and resurrection of Jesus, *'that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'* (Romans 8.38-39)

Our first response, as Christians then, if we feel under threat, or if we feel that in some way we're being diminished, must be intentionally to remember that we are loved with an everlasting love and that nothing can separate us from that love – to remember, in other words, the message of the cross.

The Christians in Corinth got into strife because they drifted away from the message of the cross as the foundation for their lives. This passage is given to us that we might not make the same error.