

A sermon preached by Bishop Brian Farran in Christ Church Cathedral on Epiphany 3 2011.

Text: 1 Corinthians 1: 10-18.

We are all aware of the frenetic bidding by nations to host the Olympic Games. Our memory of the Sydney Olympics can be readily ignited, perhaps more easily than was the Olympic fiery cauldron at the actual Opening Ceremony. I think we all can recall Cathy's Freeman's momentary look of anguish!

Corinth hosted an equivalent of the Olympic Games, the Isthmian Games held every two years. These games brought large numbers of competitors and tourists to this cosmopolitan city – a city whose origins I detailed last Sunday. Strategically located guarding the narrow isthmus that connects the Peloponnesus (as southern Greece was called) to the mainland, Corinth was a powerful commercial centre near two seaports only seven kilometres apart.

Lechaeum, the western harbour in the Corinthian Gulf was the trading port to Italy and Sicily, and Cenchræe, the eastern harbour in the Saronic Gulf, was the port for the eastern Mediterranean countries. In the fifth century BC a 1.5 metre wide rock-cut tract (Gk. *diolkos*) had been constructed for wheeling small ships and their unloaded cargo from one gulf to the other. The Emperor Nero attempted to dig a canal between the two ports but this failed. There is now a functioning canal for small shipping.

This engineering ingenuity typified the ethos of Corinth and the go-get-it attitude of its people. Corinth thrived economically boosted by traders, travellers and tourists, the very kinds of people that are being encouraged to regenerate the economy of flood-ravished Queensland.

Saint Paul was the founding apostle of the church in Corinth. Upon his arrival from Athens in 51 AD Paul lodged with two Jewish Christians, Prisca and Aquila who had fled from Rome because of the reprisals taken by the Emperor Claudius in 41 AD against Jews and Christians after a civil disturbance at a turbulent synagogue.¹ At this stage, the Romans had not learned to distinguish between Jews and Christians thinking that Christians were a Jewish sect.

Corinth was an ideal city for all three to ply their trade of tent making. Corinth was responsible for the Isthmian Games, one of the four great Panhellenic festivals, and vast numbers of tents were necessary both for the crowds that flocked to the sanctuary of Poseidon of Isthmia and for the shopkeepers of Corinth who went out to serve them.

As I indicated last Sunday, Paul spent about eighteen months in Corinth before heading off to Jerusalem by way of Ephesus. During this time in Corinth the church that Paul founded attracted members of the upper middle class, even though Paul himself was a manual labourer. For instance, Gaius had a house big enough for the whole church to meet within it².

Not long after Paul has left Corinth, he receives news that there is strife and factionalism within the fledgling church at Corinth. Paul received details from Chloe's people. Chloe was a business woman with businesses both in Corinth and Ephesus –'it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you.'³ Paul's immediate response is given in verse 10

¹ Jerome Murphy O'Connor in The Cambridge Companion to St Paul ed. James Dunn. 2003. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.74.

² See Romans 16:23.

³ 1 Corinthians 1:11.

I ask you, brothers and sisters, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all take the same side, and that there are no splits among you but that you are knitted together again with the same mind-set and with the same consent.⁴

Paul then sent Timothy, his closest ministry collaborator, to Corinth on a fact-finding mission. However, before Timothy can report back to Paul a delegation from the church in Corinth arrives in Ephesus bearing a letter to Paul from the Corinthian church. So now Paul has three sources of information – Chloe and her people, the delegation from Corinth and the letter from the church.

So begins the correspondence! So too begins Paul's practical theological reflections that form the substance of this letter to the church in Corinth. We are reading from this letter for the next five Sundays. The Church still uses this letter for our continuing inspiration and edification because we still face similar issues.

In the extract that was read this morning, we encounter the major problem in the church in Corinth that caused Paul great anguish – 'there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters'. These quarrels have led to splits.

Paul was conscious of the huge divisions that fractured human society within the highly socially stratified Roman Empire. Paul names these divisions several times, making the theological point in a variety of ways that Christ is the source of unity for the whole of humanity. The New Testament scholar and translator James Moffatt commented that '[the rhetoric of status was part of] the fractiousness which had been the curse of Greek democracy [and] had made its way into the local church...'⁵

In his letters to the Galatians and the Colossians Paul argues that the fundamental divisions experienced in the first century – Jew/Greek, male/female, slave/free - are overcome in Christ.

In Galatians Paul makes this great declaration about the effect of Baptism

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.⁶

Paul responds to the damaging issue of splits (the Greek word is *schismata* from which we get schism) by invoking theology. Resort to theology ought to be a first response by the Church to its internal issues.

The theology that Paul invokes is a theology of the Lordship of Christ and a Christology of the cross – 'I ask you, brothers and sisters, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ'. In the Bible 'name' meant more than a personal designation. A name carried within it the idea of a particular character.

This is the background to Moses' persistence in the Book of Exodus⁷ to learn God's name. The name given to Moses was four Hebrew consonants – an unpronounceable word that stymied Moses' request!

⁴ I Corinthians 1:10 –translation by Anthony C. Thiselton in his commentary, The First Epistle to the Corinthians. 2000. Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, p.108.

⁵ Anthony Thiselton. 2000. p.118.

⁶ Galatians 3: 27-28.

⁷ Exodus 3:14.

In fact, naming was believed to confer distinct character hence the significance of name changes like Jacob to Israel, Saul to Paul. Paul is urging the Corinthian Christians to reflect in their behaviour the character of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The character of the Lord Jesus is seen supremely and transparently in the cross. The cross is the ultimate lengths to which God goes in order to bring about real reconciliation with humankind. This costly reconciliation which dissipates the accumulated human aggravation with God that distanced humankind from God enables a unity of intimacy with God.

The effects of this costly reconciliation are at risk because of the disunity within the Corinthian church. The various splits are unreconciled thus squandering the outcome of the cross. This is Paul's anxiety –'lest the cross of Christ should be nullified.'

Paul's rhetoric attempts to highlight the absurdity of what is taking place in the Corinthian Church. He is horrified by their splits and consequent personal antagonism, as outsiders are today with any similar behaviour in a church. Famously the German philosopher Nietzsche once said 'I would believe in the Saviour, if his disciples looked a little more saved.' The Corinthian dilemma is still with us and still wreaks its particular damage of discrediting the integrity of the Church.

Paul's overall response to the Corinthians is to insist that as the church they are a theological community, that their identity is primarily given theologically and not from their own individual experiences, or their place in Corinthian society but that their identity is through their belonging to Christ. This theological identity 'being clothed with Christ'⁸, a direct consequence of baptism, requires them to be of the same heart and mind because a prime consequence of the cross is the unification of God and humankind, reconciliation.

This calling to reconciliation is the primary calling and work of the Church now. Reconciliation is always the Church's work.

In the Second Letter to the Corinthians Saint Paul will affirm to the church in Corinth (and to us too who read this letter as Holy Scripture)

if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.⁹

Living within reconciliation and for reconciliation is the very purpose of the Church.

⁸ Galatians 3:27.

⁹ 2 Corinthians 5: 17-18.