

Homily Notes – 1Cor 1:1-17

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‘Has Christ been divided?’ (1 Cor 1: 1-17)

The modern Christian is confronted by a world that is suspicious of authorities and out of sympathy with the message of Christianity, a message of divine intervention in human living for the sake of saving people for eternal happiness. Paul, writing to Corinthian Christians, rather formally addresses himself to them; he appeals regularly to his authority as an apostle and proceeds to deal with the problems that they are confronted by because they have become Christians. These problems concern divisions over foods that can be eaten, headwear, behaviour at the lord's supper, marriage, idols, and lawsuits among Christians. Factions have arisen. At the least we can say that the ‘church of God’ in Corinth was not a model community. If the Irish are famed for having ‘the split’ as the first item on any new group's agenda then we may find common ground with Corinthian Christians.

Paul addressed a community in Corinth that was exceptionally cosmopolitan for its day. He did not think much, though, of the ‘wisdom of speech’ that in all probability lay behind the developing factions. It was likely an early form of group-think. Instead, he preached the ‘good news’: the cross of Christ. This, for him, is what being an apostle is about. He was called to it and he writes to people who have themselves been called. Who has called them? God, the faithful one (v.9). To what? To communion of the son, Jesus Christ. This communion – *koinonia* – encapsulates Christian fellowship; it will resonate later in the epistle for the Lord's supper or eucharist (chapters 9-10). Christ is the centre and Paul's rhetoric makes this abundantly clear. Six times (out of 14 references to Christ) Paul speaks of ‘our/the

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lord Jesus Christ' in this passage. When Christians make Christ their focus then unity 'of mind and purpose' comes about. The subtext is that factions cease when the principle of unity is clear, accepted. Christ is not divided.

The Christ of Paul's question, however, refers more to the body of Christ (12:27), the body of believers in Christ. It is evident that this Christ is divided. It was divided in Corinth and it is divided in our Christian denominationalism today. However, Paul did not answer yes to his own rhetorical question; he presumed no. His answer seems to go beyond the reality of divisions that confronted him and which occasioned his letter, divisions in which factions arise and supporters of one quarrel with those of another. We discern here not the individual Christ but an idealised if yet somatised Christ, a constructive myth, we may say.

Our thinking is always incomplete and limited – we are bound, and the binding is often of our own making. The modern rush to decision, of yes or no, needs more space. Do we not need to think again? Have we no way to a better tactic of thinking? Edward de Bono talks of PO, a language tool and a skill he developed that allows space for the possible, however impossible, and for alternative solutions before the finality of yes and no be made. He even calls it a laxative for the mind. To bring resolution to conflict requires creativity and thinking-outside-the-box. Paul knew this and tried, in his way, for his time, to get people to think in a different way, to think as if they were united in Christ. Likewise, in cases of heinous crimes or school-yard bullying, a new approach, called restorative justice, offers a way beyond retribution and restitution. There is a realisation that, at least in some cases, victim and culprit can achieve a type of reconciliation that enables both to free themselves from the chains of violence, hurt, fear, ignorance and recrimination and permits growth again.

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Christians, divided for centuries, have to deal with their destructive myths. For instance, as Johnston McMaster alerts us, there is ‘the Protestant and Catholic violent god-myth at the heart of a medieval and Reformation interpretation of Christ’s atonement symbolised and dramatized at the heart of the Eucharist’ (*Overcoming Violence*, p.108). The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity marks the reality of modern disunity, divisions and destructive myths – Paul called them *schismata* (v.10) – among Christians. Perhaps the divisions are not always as vitriolic or rabid today as once they were; but, they still hold sway and corrode Christian witness. Many Christians do not trust others of another hue. Many do not share Eucharistic hospitality. Some may still anathematize others. So, Christ has been divided and continues to be so.

Indeed, we are all shaped by our beginnings. The ideologies and myths that nourished us are not expunged easily, as Paul began to realize, even when the good news is brought to us and we embrace it and confess it. We judge one another, which is to say, we condemn them; we laud ourselves for our virtue, which is to say, we pity their lack of it; and we refuse to see ourselves in others for they are not us. Instead, recognising our failures and what God offers in Christ, we are called to new myth-making...to believe that we are on the way to the unity for which Christ prayed (John 17), to live as if all are one in Christ, to practise unity day by day in prayer, thought and deed; little acts that reconstruct our thoughts and establish new patterns of behaviour and belief, a reconstructive surgery by grace. Thereby, we may hope to make that ideal of unity a reality. For, the grace of God (v.3) is still offered to us; it invites us to enter God’s way of thinking, what Paul elsewhere calls ‘putting on the lord Jesus Christ’ (Romans 13:14). And, the peace of God (v.3) still beckons us to integrity and wholeness. Christ may yet be whole.

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