

Blessings and Woes
a sermon preached on the
third Sunday after epiphany
Sunday 26th January 2020
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by *Revd Colleen Clayton*

the lections: Isaiah 9: 1-4; Psalm 27: 1-10; 1 Corinthians 1: 10-18 Matthew 4: 12-25.

When Stephen and I went to Turkey and Greece last year we visited the site on Ancient Corinth. By the time St Paul visited Corinth, the Romans had destroyed an earlier city, rebuilt it and made it the provincial capital of Greece. It was a large, cosmopolitan, and very wealthy city.

Much of Corinth's money came, as is always the case with real estate, from its location. It is situated on an isthmus with a port on each side and prior to the completion of the Corinth Canal in 1893, in order to get from the Gulf of Corinth to the Saronic Gulf on the Aegean Sea, ships had to sail a very long way around. Ancient Corinth capitalised on this by charging ship owners a fortune to have their boats rolled across the peninsula from one gulf to the other.

Paul's companions Priscilla and Aquila were from Corinth and he seems to have spent some time there as well as writing to the church he established there. It is a church that appears to have caused him some heartache as it struggled to centre its life on the Gospel in a wider social context of injustice, greed, status-seeking, the use and abuse of others, and the poverty and enslavement of some as the foundation of the wealth of others. Does that sound familiar?

But one of Paul's greatest concerns for the church in Corinth was its internal divisions. He writes, *Now 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, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.* (1 Cor 1:10)

This is certainly not a problem that has disappeared over time. It often seems that the Anglican church spends far more time arguing over issues of human sexuality and the way in which the Bible should be read and interpreted than it spends on preaching the Gospel and caring for the poor and the marginalised.

Of course, it's not just the church that has factions. At a national and international level divisions, factions and blind allegiance within and between groups stops society from adequately addressing problems of real importance, such as the increasing disparity between rich and poor, climate change, rising global slavery, the unsustainable depletion of natural resources, and the huge number of displaced people in the world.

And we can probably all recognise the tendency to the same problems within the local communities to which we belong, including our own parish.

Paul urges the Corinthians to put these problems behind them by being united in the same mindset and the same intention. I don't know about you but when I hear that, part of me bristles. I have heard people try to make me be quiet by appealing to unity and peace. Paul's words can, and have been, used coercively to silence opposition and permit ongoing abuse. But this is not his intention. He tells us that using eloquent wisdom, weasel words, and manipulation, would empty the cross of its power. This is not what Paul wants to do. Instead, he is passing on a message that is *foolishness to*

those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Cor 1:18)

Paul's message is that the mindset and the intention that is to unite us must be cross-shaped. This is not peace and consensus achieved through coercion and manipulation but peace that is achieved through the gracious yielding of believers to each other, seeking the good of the other and of the group rather than demanding the gratification of selfish desires.

Paul goes on to tell us how the cross, Rome's terrible instrument of torture and death, can be used by God as a means of addressing the problem of factions and restoring people to relationship with each other and with God.

Paul says that he was not sent to baptise but to *proclaim the gospel*. (1 Cor 1:17a) In fact, the Greek does not use the phrase *proclaim the gospel*, but just the verb *to gospel*; *euangelizomai*. *Christ did not send me to baptise but to gospel.*

There is a huge difference between proclaiming something and simply doing it. "Perhaps Paul's most significant gospeling happened not when he was speaking at all, but in the ways he treated people when they gathered for the Lord's supper, or in his care for his co-workers (1 Corinthians 9:6)."¹

Sometimes it is hard to speak or to hear without the words adding fuel to the factional fires that divide us. Where there has been a history of pain and mistrust, it seems that any words make things worse, robbing the cross of its power. But gospeling actions proclaim the power of God to save.

Later in his letter to the Corinthians, in chapter 13, Paul spells out exactly what those gospeling actions are; patience, kindness, endurance, belief, hope, humility, forgiveness. As we embody these things in the life of our community, we move from believing a theory about the gospel, to gospeling; making the gospel solid and real, visible to those around us in the quality of our interactions and the holiness of our lives.

The foolish message about the cross saves us as we begin to see that it reveals to us the nature of God. God loves humanity, and all creation, and is willing to suffer in order to restore us to relationship with God. Humanity too often seeks to ensure our power through joining with others who will support against those who don't, but in doing so we destroy our relationships. As we learn to give ourselves away, as God does in Jesus, we discover that the power of God can bring life out of death. "The cross exposes God's wisdom for all the world to see; but only those who understand the strange logic of God's power—perfectly revealed in Christ's weakness—know what it is they're seeing."²

Epiphany is the season for focusing on the revelation of God in Christ, especially that revelation to the Gentiles. Christ is the light of the world, come to shine in the darkness revealing that God's love is for everyone.

The epiphany that Paul is proclaiming is that God's self-giving love offers new life to us all. Christ dying on the cross seems to the world like foolishness; the triumph of brokenness and death. But these things do not have the final word. God's wisdom is far deeper and stronger than the world can understand. God's self-giving love transforms the cross, sweeping us up into the gospel of wholeness and holiness.

Yesterday, the Anglican church in many countries remembered Florence Li Tim-Oi. You may never have heard of her and yet she was the first woman in the Anglican Communion ever to be ordained priest.

Florence had been ordained a deacon in Hong Kong in 1941. Following the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong and parts of China, it was impossible for outside clergy to get

¹ From a commentary on this passage by Jane Lancaster Patterson. <http://workingpreacher.org>

² From a commentary on this passage by Jane Lancaster Patterson. <http://workingpreacher.org>

through to neutral Macau. Because of the difficulty of the circumstances and the need for priestly ministry, Bishop Hall first authorised her to give the sacraments and later, in 1944, 30 years before any other Anglican church, he ordained her as priest. Hall wrote to the then Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple saying, *I'm not an advocate for the ordination of women. I am, however, determined that no prejudices should prevent the congregations committed to my care having the sacraments of the Church.*³

Florence had an extraordinary ministry and suffered much for it, including re-education in Beijing. She was pressured by the church to resign her licence as a priest and it was not until 1971, when Hong Kong ordained two other women priests that she was officially recognised as a priest in the diocese.

Despite factions and prejudice, under extremely dangerous circumstances, with enormous courage, Florence got on with gospeling. Her life revealed the power of God in Christ, at work bringing wholeness and holiness.

Thank goodness, most of us are not called to face the kinds of difficulties that challenged Florence. However, gospeling is never easy to do. In fact, it is not possible to do in our own strength. Fortunately, we are not asked to. There is a clue and an encouragement for us right at the end of today's reading. Paul says *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.* (1 Cor 1:18) To us who are being saved.

“For Paul, salvation is not a once-in-a-lifetime event but an ongoing embodied process of mending the fabric of relationships”.⁴ So, let us who are being saved, day by day re-commit our lives to the power God and ask for God's help to gospel with our whole lives.

Amen.

³ Quoted on Wikipedia, taken from: Rose, Mavis (1996). *Freedom From Sanctified Sexism – Women Transforming the Church*

⁴ From a commentary on this passage by Jane Lancaster Patterson. <http://workingpreacher.org>