



Proper 2, Year C – January 17, 2010

1 Corinthians 12.1-11

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Canon M. Ansley Tucker

No one can say "Jesus is Lord," claims Paul, except by the Holy Spirit.

Now, what on earth would prompt Paul to make a statement like that? We have a tendency to read Scripture in isolation from the context in which it was first written. We almost forget that the local Church has gathered in the home of one of its members, and is listening with eager hearts as one of the literate among them reads the letter which Paul has sent along with a courier from "the churches of Asia."

Of all the letters in the New Testament, 1 Corinthians is one of the most obviously written to address issues which have arisen in Corinth. Clearly, someone has applied to Paul for his wisdom on these matters, and he goes through them like a shopping list: Now, he says at the beginning of Chapter 7, "concerning the matters about which you wrote...", and we get a whole chapter on sex and marriage. Then in Chapter 8, "Now, concerning food sacrificed to idols..." And in Chapter 16, "Now, concerning the collection for the saints..." (Paul, it appears had no trouble asking for money!). And today, in Chapter 12, "Now, concerning spiritual gifts..." – and here it comes – "No one can say, Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit."

You have to imagine that there were folks going around Corinth claiming allegiance to Jesus, that at least some of the Corinthians thought had no right to do so.

Here is what we know of the Corinthian community. It was a fractious church, with people lining up behind their favourite leader (whether Apollos or Paul or Peter/Cephas), and anathematising the other groups. It was a Church beset by moral difficulties and many disagreements about the best way in which to integrate Gentiles into the Jewish Christian community (hence the chapters about sex and marriage, and whether it was all right to buy meat at the market that had previously been used for a pagan sacrifice). There also seems to have been some hankering after prestige, based on one's role in the community, or what particular spiritual gifts one manifested (let us say, the working of miracles, speaking in tongues, faith, and so on.)

And Paul is saying in effect, "Cut it out! Anyone who believes Jesus is Lord — whether or not they agree with you on the details of how the church should be run, whether or not they are especially gifted, or have achieved stature among you, whether or not they have sinned grievously — any such person has the Holy Spirit." No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.

And whether you like it or not, this makes such a person a member of the Body of Christ, a brother or sister. I can hate some aspect of my body; it can even be diseased and work against me; but it is still mine. I am still me. And the bottom line is, I had better learn to deal with my body, all of it.

This is the context, then, in which Paul then launches into his passionate *apologia* for the diversity of the Church. Because Paul's is a context quite similar to our own, we do well to give him ear. I sense in both Church and society, increasing strain on the fabric of our unity, largely because we have allowed our differences to harden into polarities. We have become expert at labeling one another — and frequently in ways which are calculated to liberate us from the hard responsibility of

dealing with the otherness of the other, of dealing with the other as a human being who is as much a part of God's hopes for the future as I am. I don't know about you, but I am thoroughly tired of politics which treats dissenting opinion as the uninformed rambling of idiots, a position most notably given voice in the genre called "attack ads". And I am equally tired of Anglicans who would happily "unchurch" each other on the basis of their opinions about anything from sexuality to the virgin birth.

Paul is actually valuing our diversity, he is saying, Whoa! Your very survival depends not upon sameness, but on difference. You can't simply un-church people who profess Christ with every bit as much devotion as you do: they have the Spirit. You can't dis-member people who disagree with you. Your unity does not consist in sameness, but in the fact that God loves, and in-Spirits, you all.

To live with such diversity is hard work. Most of us would prefer to keep company with people who see things just the way we do (which is why, for example, we are seeing the rise of such groups as the Anglican Network). As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, the brains in the crowd want every one to act like brains; which is a problem because the hearts in the crowd want everyone to act like hearts; even the hangnails aren't satisfied until they have drawn someone else into their inflammatory complaining.¹ The problem is, you can't function if you're all heart; and pure brain is pure nerd; and pure hangnail is just plain disproportionate! Our wholeness depends on diversity, balance, and mutual respect.

Paul's life work was to ensure that there was room in the company of God's beloved for people (in his case, Gentiles) whom many would have considered beyond the pale. Gentiles, women, slaves -- these were the outcasts of his society. It is interesting to imagine whom he might champion in our own times. His point is simply this: the Church is a community where *any one* who believes Jesus is Lord belongs. Even you. Even me.

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¹ Loosely after Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1997), p. 87. It is also Taylor who makes the point that survival depends upon variety.