

Epiphany 3, '11
Twente/Arnhem

Isaiah 9:1-4
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Matthew 4:12-23

United for Christ

The Voice of Holland. Strictly come dancing. The Eurovision Song contest. Over the Rainbow. The X Factor. Pop Stars.

There seems to be no end of TV shows these days where the audience gets to phone in and help decide who is the most popular singer, or dancer, or actrice or whatever.

It is perhaps a sign of the times. We live in a society that is increasingly modelled on the marketplace. And that is seen to be a good thing. We have, in the West, long had a market-driven economy, and we revel in how supply and demand makes a wider array of good cheaper and cheaper. And more and more every aspect of our lives, not just when we are shopping, is governed by market-mindedness. We want choice and value-for-money in our schools, healthcare, and even in our churches. We shop around. Customer loyalty is hard won.

I wonder how often we stop to think about this major shift in our way of thinking? At one point in our history, people were, rightly or wrongly, in part defined by what they produced. So, in all western languages, there are family names like Smith, Baker, and Mason.

But today we are more and more defined by what we consume, not by what we produce. 'I'm a Tommy Hilfiger guy; or I'm a Prada woman; or I'm into Audis or whatever.' And in a society where people are identified by what they consume rather than what they make, once again, as usual, it is the poor, the outcast, the less mobile, who lose out.

With many of these kinds of developments, we can get trapped into thinking that it was nicer in the old days.

But that is not always true, of course.

The Apostle Paul made an impact for Christ in Corinth – a mercantile city full of international types, many of whom were well educated and talented. A place, though ancient, not all different to any major, competitive city today's globalized world economy.

Paul had preached the Gospel of Christ for some years there and many had been touched and changed by his words and example.

But that did not mean that the Corinthians didn't start to feel like shopping around, craving a flashier approach, going after charismatic preachers who were into building a fan-base. It had become a little like the Eurovision Song Contest.

You can see, in Corinth, the seeds of the dissension and divisiveness that has so plagued the Christian tradition for 2000 years.

For my part, I have come to believe that it is a fact of our existence that we humans, even Christian humans, though we are all created in God's image, we all have legitimately different personalities and backgrounds and preferences.

Jesus began the church by calling together a rag-tag group of fishermen. He saw potential in them that perhaps few others did. But he knew that as fishermen, they were known in the community, that they not only worked their nets, but were capable of networking with their friends, families and communities. He called them to be fishers of people.

They were a diverse group, but he managed to form them into a team. That is why it is such a shame when we cannot agree better, in some way, to be one, as Jesus prayed for all his followers, before he went to his death. John 17:20-21a: 'Father, I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they all may be one.'

The history of our faith, whose central value is love, has been one too often of division and dissension. And that has been a poor advertisement for love.

This week we are in the midst of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Throughout the world, this week, Christians of all traditions have been and will be joining Christ in his prayer that we all may be one. May God's will be done.

May our love for Christ and each other overcome the disagreements that we have had. That we all may be one in his name.

Paul writes to his friends in Corinth:

1:¹⁰ Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. ¹²What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.'

You could, without doing great injustice to the sense of the text, substitute: 'I belong to the Protestant Church'; 'No, I belong to the Roman Catholic Church'; 'No, I'm Methodist'; 'I'm Baptist'; 'I'm Anglican' or 'I'm Anglo-Catholic / Evangelical / Liberal, whatever....'

To all these claims, Paul has one simple challenge and it is this:

¹³'Has Christ been divided?' The answer is 'No'.

To respond to concerns about popularity and persuasive rhetoric, and those who would corner a share of the Christian market, Paul simply asks: ¹³'Has Christ been divided?'

To those who think Paul is not as attractive a leader anymore or as powerful a preacher, he simply says:

Christ sent me 'to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. ¹⁸ 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.'

In a world of choice, Christ chose to die. For all of us, *even* those who refuse him. That simple, breathtaking act of self-sacrificial love summed up Jesus' whole life. Simple fisherman had heard of Jesus. They chose to follow him, to live a life of sacrifice and service, one where they learned to get along together, because of the love of Christ they shared.

May we all pray and try to be one: in, through and for Christ. No it's not easy, love never is. But if we look at others as Christ looks at us, we begin to see. And truly to live his love.