

**SERMON: 22/1/2023: EPIPHANY3: SUNDAY BETWEEN 21 AND 27  
JANUARY: 1 Corinthians 1.10-18  
GEOFF CHADWICK  
"HOLD HANDS AND STICK TOGETHER"**

Every now and then you will hear people say that the early church must have been wonderful. In many ways it was – one of its great attractions was that people from different races, ages, genders and cultures mixed together. The Greco-Roman era, in which the early church found itself, was beset with division. Different races did not mix, genders and age groups were often separated, and debating was a way of life! You may recall that the Coliseum in Rome, whilst hosting all walks of life in the crowd, was carefully designed so that the different classes did not mix. Entrances and exits for different classes were kept separate, and barricades prevented people from spilling over into the wrong area. Upper class people sat near the action whilst the lower classes were high up in the far away galleries.

[Nearer to the gods we might say – which, if I'm not careful, could turn into a different sermon topic!]

The church was the one place where such separations did not exist. This was one of its great attractions. Outsiders wondered at the mixed nature of Christian gatherings. It was one of the Church's greatest evangelistic tools. People wanted to belong!

Where Paul writes in Galatians:

*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 (Gal 2:28, NRSV).*

It is not theory. It is a description of the church at its best.

But, as so often happens with something new and radical, old ideas and habits are prone to creep in. This is what we hear in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians today. Forgetting their non-exclusivist ideal, the Christians of Corinth harken back to the exclusivist culture of the day.

Paul writes:

*<sup>11</sup> My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. <sup>12</sup> What I mean is this: one of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ' (1 Cor 1:11-12, NRSV)*

The church had turned into some sort of political rally- each party is proclaiming its own slogan:

*"I follow Paul"ect.*

The church was in danger of splitting apart along splinter group lines. The members had forgotten that. It was that had attracted them to the church in the first. They had forgotten, that in Christ, they had discovered unity in diversity!

Later in the letter Paul addresses what they were arguing over – issues such as circumcision, and the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. Whilst important, Paul proclaims that unity is a higher cause than petty disputes.

Sadly such disputes litter the pages of church history. In 1054 the church split between east and west over differences in understandings of the Holy Spirit. This is so ironical, because it is the Spirit that is meant to bring unity!

Later in the 1500s those who protested over some of the practices of the Catholic Church became known as the Protestants. Subsequently Europe plunged into the horrors of the 100 year war.

Meanwhile in England there was much wrangling over what an "English" church should look like. In 1662 The English Parliament passed a new "*Act of Uniformity*" to replace to old Act of 1559. It prescribes how public prayers, the sacraments and other rites and ceremonies of the church should be conducted. These prescribed prayers are now what Anglicans know as the *1662 Book of Common Prayer*.

This *Prayerbook* remains the model for our modern *Prayerbooks*. That's why we Anglicans love our *Prayerbooks*- they are designed to keep us rebellious lot together!

Here's what it the *Act of Uniformity* says at the beginning:

*that many Persons nevertheless refuse to come to their Parish Church; that by the Neglect of Ministers many Persons have been led into Schism; that His Majesty, according to His Declaration of 25th Oct, 1660, had granted a Commission to review the Book of Common Prayer, and that the Convocations were assembled for that Purpose; that they had presented to His Majesty a Book of Common Prayer, which he had allowed and recommended to Parliament that the same should be used in all Churches, &c.; that an universal Agreement in public Worship conduceth to settling the Peace of the Nation; Ministers in Churches, &c. to use the said Book of Common Prayer;; and to read the Morning and Evening Prayers therein.*

<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/statutes-realm/vol5/pp364-370>

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Now, sad to say, there are divisions in the church today. These usually indicate a time where differences of opinion could not be resolved or could not be tolerated.

The Anglican Church has often prided itself on being a church where differences of opinion are welcomed and tolerated, although it has not always been successful,

Ideally such differences are meant to generate lively discussion and debate. Usually, these opinions are not about fundamental beliefs, and whilst they may be uncomfortable, they do not spit the church.

Problems do arise however when debates centre around whether an issue is about a fundamental belief or not. Sadly this is where we are over the issue of same-gender marriages.

For some, this is not a matter of fundamental Christian belief and they do not see it as a “church-splitting” issue. Others however, do see it as a fundamental as it relates to how they understand the bible.

We as a Diocese have been grappling with this for several years, and despite our best efforts, some have chosen to leave the church over this issue. Some have done this quietly and simply drifted off to other denominations (or none), whilst others have been a little more noisy in their departure.

We cannot control others’ free will even if, and especially if we do not grasp their thinking. Departure is always sad and always leads to grief and confusion.

But you see, this is what St Paul was on about. Without pulling any punches, Paul tells the people to stop fighting, and to seek unity:

*<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.*

Paul knows, only too well that disagreement breeds fracture.

I'm conscious of something my Dad told me as a kid. When a football team was losing game after game (not ours, of course), he would say:

*"There's something rotten in the camp."*

He would then go on to explain that more training and cleverer tactics would probably not improve things. What would make a change is getting the players and coaches to get along with each other.

Perhaps my dad was quoting Paul in another guise!

Now, in the real world we know there are situations that cannot be resolved so easily. There are times when separation seems to be the only way forward. Even so might I suggest that it is the kindergarten that teaches us otherwise. I offer a little poem by Robert Fulghum which might give us a way forward:

*ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW about how to live and what to do and how to be I  
learned in kindergarten.*

*Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the  
sandpile at Sunday School.*

*These are the things I learned:*

*Share everything.*

*Play fair.*

*Don't hit people.*

*Put things back where you found them.*

*Clean up your own mess.*

*Don't take things that aren't yours.*

*Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.*

*Wash your hands before you eat.*

*Flush.*

*Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.*

*Live a balanced life—learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and  
dance and play and work every day some.*

*Take a nap every afternoon.*

*When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.*

*Wonder.*

*Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: The roots go down and the plant  
goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.*

*Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam  
cup—they all die. So do we.*

*And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned—the  
biggest word of all—LOOK.*

*Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and  
basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and equality and sane living.*

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/56955/all-i-really-need-to-know-i-learned-in-kindergarten-by-robert-fulghum/9780345466396/excerpt>

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Despite our differences, may we have the courage to “hold hands, and stick together.”

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**