

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of the Epiphany

Isaiah 49:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

### *Opening a Letter*

This morning we've read someone else's mail. Admittedly, this letter was written back in 55 A.D., and it's been read by countless others since then. Nevertheless, that's what we're doing. It's a letter addressed by Paul to a fledgling faith community in the Mediterranean city of Corinth.

The Corinthians wouldn't have been chuffed about having this letter broadcast down the centuries as it portrays them in an unflattering light. This correspondence, which we know as First Corinthians (though it wasn't Paul's first or his last letter to them), reveals a number of things which they would prefer us not to know: conflict and dissension within the faith community, sexual immorality, legal disputes among members, abuses of the Eucharist, theological controversies, and much more.

Every faith community has its struggles at times. I've been with you long enough to have heard accounts of painful times in our past and, yes, experienced a few in my time, and there will be more. Reflecting on these challenging times, I'm grateful for this letter that we've opened this morning, because it reminds us that our forebears struggled with similar issues; that communal tensions are nothing new and that we can learn from those who have gone before us. We can be encouraged, knowing that with God nothing is wasted, and that God continues to use us to fulfil the divine purposes.

Paul is dealing with some tough issues and strong words are going to be spoken. So, right from the beginning, he sets out his central concern, and that's quite simply, *Jesus*. In the first nine verses Paul mentions the name of Jesus eight times. He can't stop talking about Jesus, because without Jesus nothing else makes any sense. He wants the Corinthians to grasp that Jesus is to be the centre of their lives, the focus of their energy, imagination, and thoughts. Jesus is to be at the heart of how they see and understand life and to be at the centre of all they do and how they relate. When things get out of kilter, when we have difficulties and face challenges, let's work to see the situation in the light of Jesus – looking at it through the lens of God's love as shown on the cross.

The opening sentence of this letter strikes me. It's not written to the church *of* Corinth, but to 'the church of God that's *in* Corinth ... sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.' Apply that to ourselves. We aren't simply the Anglican Parish of Hastings. Nor are we merely a part of the Diocese of Waiapu. We are part of the church of God that is in Hastings, and we've been called to be saints. We are God's people, set apart for a God-filled and Jesus-centred life, and we have a role to play in God's purposes.

In the New Testament 'saints' don't refer to a select holy few. Through baptism we become part of a family of people set apart for the service of God, dedicated to God. That's the root meaning of the word, 'saint'. A Christian is someone who knows that they belong to God, that Jesus is the central focus of their lives and that through all that they do and are, they are seeking to make that real. We belong to God and we've been called for the service of God.

At one time or other, most of us probably doubt our value, or despair of finding a meaningful purpose for our lives. It's then that we need to hear the word which Isaiah speaks, and which Paul reflects. Isaiah proclaims that we aren't only significant but of *divine* significance. 'The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me... And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."' In other words, we're called for a purpose: to be God's servants. Isaiah calls the people to move beyond themselves and to take on a greater role in the world: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

As a parish we're part of something far greater than ourselves. With faith communities throughout the world, we've been called by God to make known the transforming love of Jesus. We don't exist for ourselves, but for those who have yet to know God's love. In the Gospel reading we heard how Andrew introduced Peter to Jesus. There are only three times that Andrew appears on centre stage in the Gospel story, and each time it's to introduce others to Jesus. Having found the friendship of Jesus, he spent his life introducing others to that friendship. Like Paul, he couldn't keep Jesus to himself. That's our calling. Isaiah put it another way: to be a light to the nations, that God's salvation may reach to the end of the earth. This is quite some task, but it's one that God will equip us for.

Paul is writing to a faith community that's facing serious problems, but he's not problem centred. Rather, he gives thanks to God for them, and for the gracious gifts God has given them. Gratitude is a powerful thing. We can choose to spend life complaining and becoming bitter, or we can make thankfulness a pillar of our lives and find the gift of God in what's happening. Paul is also reminding us, that as God's saints, we've been equipped for the task God has called us for. Like the Corinthians, we've been given the grace of God. God called us in the past, equips us in the present, and will complete the whole process in the future.

Paul is always looking at the big picture, and I mean **BIG**. We tend to get bogged down in the minutiae of the present. That doesn't mean that the business of running the parish doesn't matter, but it needs to be kept in perspective. Paul does this by reminding us that world history and the story of the Christian life, has a shape and a direction. It's like the long-distance runner who keeps their eye on the finishing line. For Paul the finishing line is 'the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.' This is when all creation will be recreated, restored, redeemed; when God's purposes are finally and fully fulfilled. This is the hope that underpins Christian life. We can be so heavenly minded that we aren't any earthly use, but the converse is also true. We can be so earthly, so bogged down in the stuff of the here and now, that we lose sight of where God is ultimately taking us and all creation – and we've got a valuable part to play in this divine drama.

When we see our life together within this grand, divine scheme, our perspective changes. Our actions today take on a new dimension, because what we're doing and being here at St. Matthew's, is sharing in God's renewal of the world. Paul ends this opening section of his letter like this: '[God] will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.' That 'fellowship' is our life together as a faith community; a life rooted in our shared relationship with Jesus. Christianity is a communal matter, and the quality of our life together is critical to the fulfilment of God's plans for the world. That's why God is going to do everything possible to strengthen us, and it's why we need to work hard to make our life together the best we can.

God wants to do something new with and through us as a community. We'll face difficulties and problems, but I'm confident, that as we draw on God's goodness and strength, we'll grow through them. Our life in Jesus will be strengthened and the love that God has for us will be the gift that we have to share with others. We'll be given the gifts, strength, and support we need to serve God and to be what God is calling us to be. As Isaiah said, the Lord is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, has chosen you... Thanks be to God.

*Alister Hendery  
St Matthew's, Hastings – 19.1.2020*