

The Year of St Paul 2008–2009

The 1st letter to the Corinthians

Just as the human body, though it is made up of many parts, is a single unit because all these parts, though many, make one body, so it is with Christ.

In the one Spirit we were all baptised,
Jews as well as Greeks,
slaves as well as citizens,
and one Spirit was given to us all to drink.

1 Corinthians 12;12–14



Corinth was a funny old place. It was a port city, with all the vices and virtues of such places; it was socially very diverse, with a high proportion of slaves and ex-slaves. And it was international. The city lay on an important trunk-route between the East and Rome, where all commerce eventually tended to find its way. So it was hard-nosed, streetwise, and (at least by reputation) sexually uninhibited. You wouldn't predict success for a Christian missionary there!

Not surprisingly, Paul tells us that he arrived "in fear and in much trembling", after (according to Acts 17) a minor disaster in Athens, which must have seemed a far more likely place than Corinth to be receptive to his message.

Surprisingly enough, he found a ready hearing in Corinth, possibly because he quickly formed a relationship with two Jewish Christians, tent-makers like himself, the husband and wife team of Aquila and Priscilla. He stayed there 18 months, and then kept in contact with the church he had founded in Corinth, after he had moved on. The reason for the contact was that the Corinthian Christians had not really grasped what he was on about, and tended (at least when Paul was not present among them) to despise him for not being a clever enough speaker, and not having enough "knowledge".

They wrote him a slightly self-satisfied letter, and we can imagine them waiting complacently for his admiring reply. What they get must have shaken them greatly: they are told that they were not "wise... powerful... of noble birth", but "weak... low and despised... and things that are not". There were several problems among the Church in Corinth; but the main one was simply that they were divided, and for Paul Christianity is not Christianity if it is divided. So it is in this letter that for the first time Paul sketches his famous image of the Church as the "body of Christ", all of whose parts belong together, none of which is superior to the other.

We can imagine their shock when, instead of responding admiringly to their self-praise, Paul makes them wait seven chapters (almost halfway through the letter), before condescending to answer their letter. Instead, he lays into them for forming factions, especially a Paul versus Apollos faction, for immaturity, for permitting incest,

for litigation against each other, and for fornication. Picture the situation as this letter was read out; listen to the shocked silence in the room where the church gathered, and try to reconstruct what it must have been like to hear that powerful tirade let loose upon them.

When finally he comes to answering their questions, he makes it clear that they're not the important questions that they should have been asking. Though he has quite strong views on sexual morality, and on relations with other religions, and on whether it is permissible to eat food offered to idols (which was the cheapest way to get access to meat), what really counted was the things that divided them. This was what made questions about sex and meat-eating important, and this was what gave the edge to a question about what women should wear when praying or prophesying (and notice, in passing, that Paul makes no distinction between the liturgical functions of women and men). What Paul will not have at any price (and here he once again shatters their complacency), is anything that divides the People of God: it's not, he bellows, the Lord's supper if some people start eating early, while others go hungry; nor if some people speak in tongues which others cannot understand. What counts is telling the truth about Jesus; and most especially, telling the truth that Jesus is risen from the dead.

It's an extraordinary letter, written for particular purposes nearly two thousand years ago, but echoing down the centuries, still as fresh as the day when it was written.

We have a wisdom to offer those who have reached maturity: not a philosophy of our age, it is true, still less of the masters of our age, which are coming to their end. The hidden wisdom of God which we teach in our mysteries is the wisdom that God predestined to be for our glory before the ages began. It is a wisdom that none of the masters of this age have ever known, or they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory; we teach what scripture calls: the things that no eye has seen and no ear has heard, things beyond the mind of man, all that God has prepared for those who love him.

1 Corinthians 2:6-9

O God, teach us the hidden wisdom of the gospel, so that we may hunger and thirst for holiness, work tirelessly for peace, and be counted among those who seek first the blessedness of your kingdom