

Sermon preached by Sister Margaret Anne at 10am Sung Eucharist on Third Sunday of Epiphany at St Mary's Barnes 26 January 2020

Divisions within society, both in the Church and the world, whether in this country or abroad, have always been with us. In the USA at the moment there is a hard-fought battle going on between Republicans and Democrats about the position of President Donald Trump, following his impeachment. Should he be deposed? In our own nation the long and also hard-fought battle over Brexit between Remainers and Brexiteers looks as if it might be reaching a conclusion, now that we have a government with a substantial majority. But no doubt issues and questions around the subject will still rumble on for quite a time yet. The huge subject of climate change is now looming large on political agendas, but for voices such as Greta Thunberg's at a global level there is still not nearly enough being done. And there are the deep social divisions between rich and poor, and between those of differing ethnic and religious origins.

For any group or nation to be really strong, it needs to address its divisions and do its best to bring about healing and unity. This is as true for America as it is for Britain, and the way ahead for all of us is characterised in many people's minds by a degree of uncertainty and anxiety for the future. Division, whether of a group or a nation, always brings with it both the need to face the causes of division and the need to make tough decisions.

In our first reading today from the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 1.10-18) Paul addresses the problem of division in the church at Corinth head on. He explicitly states that there should be no division among them, but rather that they should be "united in the same mind and the same purpose". Serious quarrels in the church at Corinth have been reported to him. The quarrels focus on different groups within the church that demonstrate allegiance to individual leaders – leaders who are clearly at loggerheads with each other and pulling in different directions. Some say "I belong to Paul" while others say "I belong to Apollos" and so on. In response Paul asks the rhetorical question:

"Has Christ been divided?"

Paul emphasises that Christ himself is their true leader. And quarrelling and division cannot be of Christ. The cross of Christ is the centre of the Christian's faith, and the message of the cross is of course foolishness in worldly terms. The cross is a complete reversal of worldly values.

Yesterday was the final day of the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which is always from 18th to 25th January. The week of prayer for unity in the Church was first kept in 1908. The week begins with the feast of the Chair of St Peter and ends with the feast of the Conversion of St Paul. The next day, today, is kept as the feast of Ss Timothy and Titus, companions of St Paul. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity was instituted by a group of Anglican High Churchmen, who, throughout the week, celebrated the eucharist each day for the visible reunion of the Church. They saw Rome as the central see of Christendom. From then on, the observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has grown as the ecumenical movement grew through the twentieth century. It is now widely kept throughout the Church, with Christians of all denominations coming together to pray, as Jesus prayed, that we all might be one.

Unity is important for any group to thrive. And of course unity does not mean uniformity. The individual is free to follow his or her own ideas and practices, in so far as they are compatible with the core values and beliefs of the group. The core beliefs of the Christian faith are set out in the words of the Creed that we recite corporately Sunday by Sunday. But we are all human, with our inherent weaknesses and failings, and sadly down the centuries there have been huge causes of

division within the Church, resulting in many separate, autonomous churches and denominations. What we share in common is our faith in Christ who was crucified and who rose from the dead, that we might share new life in him.

In our gospel reading for today from Matthew (Matthew 4.12-23) we have an account of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and the calling of his first disciples. In Matthew's gospel account Jesus begins his ministry by proclaiming a message of repentance, for "the kingdom of heaven has come near". One of Jesus' first tasks is to call a band of followers round him, to share in his public ministry of teaching, preaching and healing. He calls ordinary people whom he encounters as he walks by the sea – fishermen. He tells first Simon Peter and Andrew his brother, and then later the brothers James and John,

"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people".

These men follow Jesus unhesitatingly, giving up all in order to be with him, and to do as he directs them. And of course the call to follow Jesus is demanding, and costly. There will be times for us, as well as there were for those early disciples, when what is being asked of us may take us into previously unknown territory, whether literally or spiritually, or both. There will be challenges and difficulties, but it will be worth it, because Jesus accompanies us in those difficulties and walks alongside us.

In this season of Epiphanytide that occupies much of the second half of Christmastide that leads up to Candlemas on 2nd of February, there are three Epiphanytide themes that can help us to focus our hearts and minds on what following Jesus really means. The first of these themes is the Epiphany story itself – the Wise Men who brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the infant Jesus. The story as told by Matthew beautifully represents the theme of the good news of Jesus being opened up to all peoples, of whatever land or race or background. But there are also two other significant themes associated with Epiphanytide: the baptism of Christ, and the miracle of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding of Cana. In the feast of the baptism of Christ we remember Jesus' own baptism and the heavenly confirmation of his true identity and calling: the voice from heaven that pronounced:

"You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased".

As soon as Jesus is baptised, his true nature is revealed, and then he is sent into the wilderness, to be tempted and to prepare for his public ministry. The third Epiphany theme – the turning of water into wine – is the first miracle of Jesus' three year public ministry, according to John's gospel. John makes it clear that the miracle was a sign that revealed Jesus' glory – and that the immediate effect of the miracle was that Jesus' disciples believed in him.

All these Epiphanytide themes serve to remind us who Jesus really is. He is the God whom we worship, who breaks down all barriers of division, whether of race, culture, ethnicity, gender or whatever. He is the beloved Son in whom God the creator delights. And he transforms people's lives, bringing newness of life to all who encounter him. This Epiphanytide may we be encouraged by Jesus' example of love and compassion for all, and endeavour to follow him in ways that promote unity and truth. Above all, may we worship Christ in ways that bring joy and gladness, serving others around us with love, and so build up God's kingdom on earth among us.