

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, Year A

Deuteronomy 30:15-20, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, Matthew 5:21-37

This morning I want to take a look at our epistle from Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. Somewhat surprisingly the passage moves from spiritual food to preference for a particular bible teacher to its climax "*you are God's field, God's building.*"

There is trouble in Corinth, Paul says. The people are immature, like babies who have not grown up. And the underlying reason seems to be that they have created their own image of church. And it is not like church should be. It demonstrates, Paul intimates, relationships that are indistinguishable from those of any other human organisation.

Let us now to use our imagination to picture ourselves in the church to which Paul is writing. It doesn't matter what you picture by way of its bricks and mortar. That's not the church any more than this building, St Mungo, is the church. The church is the people.

So, picture the people. Picture them perhaps over coffee after the service, discussing the preacher's message. Are they engaging with it? Has it been a comforting message of God's love and care – *spiritual milk* perhaps – or something more meaty, *solid food*? Are they rising to challenge together? Or are they instead arguing about whether the teaching followed that of the bible teacher they prefer, whether it is, in fact, a message to take notice of? Do they like the speaker's message because it is like that of Paul who led them to faith and founded the church? Or do they say Paul is "*unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing*" (2 Corinthians 10:10) so we want a message like that from Apollos, a more eloquent speaker who took the church forward? Are there factions among them? Are they taking sides? Or are they setting aside different likes and seeking to hear Holy Spirit in the preacher's word?

The church is not like any other human society. It is God's. **He** created the church. It is, if you like, *God's field*. This analogy enables Paul to describe himself and Apollos as farm labourers, putting them into proper perspective. They are mere farm workers, one sowing, the other watering. But it is God's field. God gives the growth if only the church members will allow it and cooperate with the farmers, all working together.

But a bigger picture is that of God's building. Further down in his letter (verse 16) Paul describes the church as God's temple and himself as a *wise builder* (verse 10).

Peter also, in his first letter (1 Peter 2:4-5), writes,

Come to the Lord... and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.

We have a choice.

Now, we know from our own experience here in this building of St Mungo, that buildings can have problems. And I think Paul alludes to two reflected in the church in our epistle.

The first is that it is not built strong enough to cope with the forces that can buffet it.

You will have heard of the Tay Rail Bridge disaster of 1879 when the bridge collapsed with a train on it when hit by very strong winds. It simply hadn't been built strong enough to withstand the force of wind that can at times tear across the Tay.

Similarly, a church comprised of babies who can only take milk and not solid food will not have the maturity to withstand the worldly forces that can blow. Builders and athletes need solid food not baby food.

And a second issue a building can face is a lack of cohesion. This can give rise to what is known as disproportionate or progressive collapse. This was demonstrated in the terrorist attack of 2001 by the collapse of the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center on 9/11. The cohesion of the building was simply not good enough to withstand the injury it sustained to its upper floors. To illustrate this in a perhaps more understandable way so that we think about this passage, Esther and Dimitri have built us visual aids out of lego. And they have been very patient waiting this morning to come and show us.

[Dimitri built a house solidly constructed, with the corners properly keyed in together, making it very strong.

Esther built a house where the four walls were all standing independently, not supporting one another at all – not very strong!]

This is a second issue in the Corinthian church. There are factions. There is an Apollos faction and a Paul faction. And where there are factions then, like Esther's building, there is no cohesion. Paul writes that there is jealousy and quarrelling. They are falling out, hardly cohesive at all. Not one body, one whole, but in danger of falling apart and breaking up. The living stones in the

Corinthian church are not letting themselves be built up into a spiritual house. God is not able to build the temple that he desires.

So, what sort of building are we, we who are part of St Mungo? Not the stones and mortar, the plumbing and the electrics – we know that there are problems there – but the real church, the people, us? Are we anywhere near being a temple such that Almighty God, who is here in the midst of us, sees as a fitting place for his glory?

I suggest that we have three questions to answer in this regard.

1. Would Paul say of us that we are only happy with milk, not solid food? Or are we those who chew deeply on God's word, anxious to get the meat out of it? What drives us when we are away from here? Are we spiritual, feeding on the meat of God's word, meditating on it, keen to grow as Christians, searching for a closer relationship with Jesus? Or are we as secular as everyone else?
2. Are there factions among us? It is a question that we must ask ourselves even if our instinctive reaction is to say that there is no "I follow Nick" or "I follow Peter" here. It is actually a difficult question to answer because, of course, we have differences of opinion, and even different interpretations of God's truth. And that in itself is not wrong. The critical thing is whether our different attitudes to truth and personnel drive a wedge between us and cause division. What do you think?

In the second century the scholar Tertullian wrote "See how (these Christians) love one another!" And Jesus said "*By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.*" (John 13:35) Does that describe us? And, if not, maybe Jesus in our gospel reading has something to say to us. Talking in the context of enmity between brothers and sisters he said "*if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.*" Interestingly, Jesus thinks reconciliation with our Christian brother or sister more important than our worship of God. Reconciliation is the cure for factiousness. And it is our responsibility.

Now we may say that there is nothing about us that anyone else could take issue with, no one has anything against me, so reconciliation is not my responsibility. But we know that is wrong, don't we? It is always our responsibility.

In Matthew 18 Jesus tells us that if someone sins against us we should go and talk privately to them about it. And he adds that we should keep on forgiving. So, whether someone has something against us, or we have something against

someone else, reconciliation is always our responsibility. This is the action of love.

We are God's building. Perhaps my third question can sum up what this means for us, and it is this:

3. Do we recognise that we are living stones and, if so, are we letting God build us up into a temple fit for his glory? Amen

Chris Shaw, 12 February 2023