

The Third Sunday of Epiphany, 26 January 2025, Year C,
Readings: Nehemiah 8.1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19.1-6; 1 Corinthians 12.12-31a; Luke 4.14-21

That there may be no dissension within the body...

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.** (Psalm 19.14)

The annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity concluded yesterday. Last Sunday our preacher was the curate of the neighbouring Lutheran parish Janina Skóra. On Tuesday the pastor of the English-speaking Methodist congregation in Vienna joined us for Morning Prayer. In the evening I attended the National Service for the Austrian Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Greek Orthodox Church, Fleischmarkt at which the Armenian Bishop in Austria Tiran Petrosyan preached and in which all the churches on the council participated. On the Friday prior to The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we had already gathered for a service 'Der Tag des Judentums' during which we acknowledge our indebtedness to the Hebrew antecedents of our faith without which there is no Christian faith as we know it, appreciate it and cherish it. To top it off the same group of church leaders gathered at the invitation of the now retired Archbishop of Vienna Cardinal Christoph Schönborn in the 'Steffl' (St Stephen's Cathedral) for his farewell service around the font to remind ourselves of our common baptism in Christ. Around the font we were reminded of the unity we already possess through our baptism into Christ, a unity which we are called to live making it come alive that the world might believe. It is for this reason we will have a closer look at the reading from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth a community that was racked with dissension by favouring one apostle over another. Paul writes,

"What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', ... For when one says, 'I belong to Paul', and another, 'I belong to Apollos', are you not merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." (1 Corinthians 1.12, 3.2-6)

Christian Unity is of God.

Another aspect of the common life lived by the Christians in Corinth that caused dissension was that some had become spiritually proud counting themselves better than others,

because of the spiritual gifts they received reiterated in today's reading. Last Sunday in the reading also from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth Paul emphasised the various spiritual gifts alongside the various services and the various activities all having their source in God's Holy Spirit for the equipping and the building up of the people of God because it is only by the Holy Spirit that we can say from the centre of our being, our gut, in tune with our hearts and minds that 'Jesus is Lord'. We should note that while Paul is concerned about the spiritual gifts for which we are to strive as we pursue love he sets these alongside both various services and various activities writing, as it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone (1 Corinthians 12.6b), continuing, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (12.7)

Today's reading follows on from the above and through it Paul provides a vivid image of our interconnectedness in the Body of Christ, our belonging to one another for the common good because there is but one body into which we are all baptised, which is the Body of Christ. He writes clearly,

"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12.12-13)

The purpose of his teaching is, '...that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another...'

The image of the body and its interconnectedness is a vivid one. Youth groups often in 'all member church services' (family services) seek to re-enact the picture of the one body that Paul draws and on which he expends a good number of sentences making it come alive that it, the picture he draws, might leave a lasting impression on the hearer and that they might know that they belong, they have value and they have something to contribute, but **they must contribute**; if they don't, they weaken the body. It is not an exaggeration to say that a church is only as strong as its members will allow. Paul even imagines for his hearers and

himself the various parts of the body speaking to one another as in, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’”

One can imagine that while dictating the letter and this particular passage Paul had at the back of his mind the Prophet Ezekiel’s vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones. In the vision the Prophet sees a valley of dry bones in which gradually through God’s spirit the bones are reconnected to one another by the Lord to raise up a people once again to the Lord God, but now by Christ, through Christ and in Christ not only the people of Israel, but ‘also Jews or Greeks, slaves or free’, the New Jerusalem. Whatever your ethnicity, whatever your social background, whether you are male or female (see Galatians), you are invited by the Lord God to become members of His body as assigned. We in the church may have lost sight of just how radical a message this is. Can we even for a fleeting moment imagine for ourselves this day Jews and Greeks meaning Gentiles, slave and free, in the one body, and if you can then you will be aware that the areas for both conflict and dissension, should we hope only for this world, were and are vorprogrammiert (pre-programmed).

On a lighter note for a moment I can’t but help think of the African American spiritual “Dem Dry Bones” as recorded by the Delta Rhythm Boys with a smile on my face: “Dem bones Dem bones Dem dry bones, Dem bones Dem bones Dem dry bones, Dem bones Dem bones Dem dry bones , Hear the word of the Lord.” The lyrics proceed with the bones being reconnected to one another in an orderly fashion. In the original version the bones jump towards each other to be reconnected emphasising the coming to life of a people who were no longer alive to God. The picture drawn by the Book of Nehemiah reading is also one of restoration, as the people return to the Lord putting themselves once again under God’s law. These pictures of restoration *The Valley of Dry Bones*, as well as Ezra conducting a reading of the Law of Moses, which is the Law of God, before those gathered, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding – these pictures are what people often long for, some saying “Make America Great Again” and others asking, “Can Europe Be Great Again?” But the Christian vision is not of restoration, but of a new people constituted by God from every tribe, language, people, and nation under heaven (Revelation 5:9) led by the Holy Spirit, who

can say as one Body, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" that this and this should be. Charles Williams, one of the Inklings an informal club whose members included Tolkien and C.S.Lewis, wrote of just those words from the Acts of the Apostles, 'It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us.' *In the Descent of the Dove, A Shorter History of the Holy Spirit*, we read,

"It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us." The sentence is, from one point of view, absurd; from another, quite ordinary. But it is neither; it is the serious implicit declaration by men [and women] that a union exists, a union denied, defeated, forgotten, frustrated, but, at the bottom of all, actual by a common consent. There are wild moments when anyone may find himself saying—with some truth—'It seems good to the Holy Ghost and to us'. But the Church has never forgotten, though it may apostatise (forsake belief) often, that this is the real claim towards which it must, inevitably and indefectibly, aspire, and in which, awfully, it believes: 'It seemed good to the Holy Ghost'—O vision of certainty!—'and to us'—O vision of absurdity! ..." (WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, page 6, 1939)

Paul in line with the example of Christ Himself and of which he writes about the absurdity of the Christian mindset, when he writes of those who are mature in Christ, admonishing them to give way to the weaker members. (Romans 15:1) How about that for straight writing? He writes in summary of how those we think of less honourable members should be clothed with greater honour. His is a topsy turvy world. The Christian world is an upside-down world.

"But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another."

Maturity in Christ comes when we no longer are needy of recognition, but know that whether we receive honour or not there are things we need to be, do and see that we might have a mind like Christ. We humble ourselves as he humbled Himself becoming obedient and should it be ours even unto death, but may we be spared. Lord, have mercy.

In conclusion and returning to Paul's letter to the church in Corinth he asks us to strive for the greater gifts the spiritual gifts, alongside and hand in hand with various events and various activities. After speaking of love he will urge the Corinthians to pursue love, strive for the spiritual gifts and especially to urge that there be no dissension amongst us and that

all all may rejoice together knowing if one suffers we all suffer, as there is only one body. Let us pray for that unity which we already possess and live the unity that God's wishes for us. Markers were set last week as people from across the denominations met for the week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Let us build on them so "that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another." **Amen.**