

Reflection: Diversity and Unity in the Holy Spirit.

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

It's hard to believe, but Lichfield Diocese runs a course on "Dealing with difficult people". It is open to clergy; but not to Readers. Could it be that Readers are regarded as the "difficult people"?

Paul would have found such a course useful in his ministry to the Church in Corinth. They weren't just difficult. They were impossible! The community was torn apart by spiritual pride. Each boasted charismatic spiritual gifts. "I am a better Christian than you are because I speak in tongues, or interpret tongues, or prophesy, or work miracles and *you don't*, or at least you don't do it *properly*". Paul had to spend three chapters of this letter to try to sort things out.

We read that there is a richly diverse variety of charismatic gifts. But all flow from the same Holy Spirit in the service of the one Lord. Once any one of them is allowed to dominate communal worship at the whim of an individual it becomes a disruptive distraction. If we exercise all those gifts at once worship becomes an unruly kindergarten. The loudest voices will dominate, causing confusion, resentment and tension. In the familiar passages that follow this reading Paul reminds us that the Church, although it has many parts, is one body. "All the members of the body, though they are many, are of one body. So it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body". [12:12-13] It is in diversity that we find unity. And no matter how powerful those gifts are, they only bear fruits if rooted in Love. "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol" [13:1] As one wise Archbishop once put it, "the Church can sometimes feel like a swimming pool in the school holidays. All the noise seems to come from the shallow end". Our worship must always be **deeply rooted** in love.

The problem of this spiritual pride that corrupts diversity into disunity has plagued the Church over the generations; and sadly plagues us today. Factional distrust rather than reverential respect for each other's traditions mars our Christian communities. We all define ourselves by self-promoting labels - Catholic or Protestant; Liberal or Conservative; Inclusive or "Orthodox" – when we should be proclaiming the Gospel, united as children of Jesus Christ.

I rejoice in the rich diversity of our own Anglican Church; a rainbow tapestry stretching from the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham to the Keswick Convention and Fresh Expressions like "New Wine". I know from my own spiritual journey that diversity need not lead to disunity. In the mid 1980s when I moved to Lichfield I was privileged to worship at St Chad's under the ministry of the

late John Widdas, a charismatic priest who had trained at the monastic religious house at Kelham. As incense drifted around us, members of the congregation spoke in tongues. It was a remarkable and formative experience. As one friend observed with intentional ambiguity, I **grew through** my charismatic experience. But equally during my spell at General Synod I was appalled by a minority of delegates from across the spectrum of labels who could barely speak civilly to each other. A minority they may have been; but they poisoned the well of debate.

Therefore, rather than talk about pride and **disunity** in the modern Church I would like to think about an ancient example of diversity and **unity**, where we are unlikely to be distracted by personal and partisan allegiances but where perhaps we may be able to stand back and think “Gosh, we could learn from that today”.

In the third century there was a remarkable blossoming of Christian spirituality centred on the deserts of Syria and Egypt. Many monastic communities inspired by pioneers like St Anthony developed their own disciplines and patterns of worship. They profoundly influenced Christendom in the East and West for over a thousand years. But many people found that they could not flourish in such communities. They slipped away to live lives of solitary holiness as hermits or anchorites. We know them as the “desert fathers” and, yes, sometimes “sisters”. They were strikingly diverse in their teaching and life style; but what they had in common was a deep commitment to Jesus. They were not just escaping from the secular world. They lived their lives in the power of Christ. A few are remembered today, such as St Simeon Stylites who sat contemplating on top of a pillar for thirty seven years. Others became lost in the mists of time. They survive only in obscure texts such as *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. But they were famous in their day. Religious tourists flocked into the wilderness from great cities such as Alexandria to sit at the feet of those they called “the great old men”. They have been brought to life in a fascinating book by Archbishop Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert*. The title, as we shall see, is derived from the lives of two very different hermits whose cells were boats moored to the banks of the Nile.

One was Abba Arsenius who spent years of holy contemplation “sitting with the Holy Spirit of God in complete silence”. The other was Abba Moses, who prior to his conversion had been a highway man, plundering the caravans of desert traders. He sat joyfully with the angel of God, encouraging the company of others and eating honey cakes. What a contrast! Thence the title “Silence and Honey cakes”.

Visiting pilgrims are reported to have been ill at ease with the spiritual austerity of Arsenius and quickly left him to enjoy the welcome and hospitality of Moses. But nobody suggested that these

diverse forms of holiness were mutually exclusive. Arsenius shunned human company; Moses received visitors with open arms. But those contrasting vocations lived side by side to the glory of God. There was no tension or friction in their diversity. It was irrelevant when visiting pilgrims (I am sure) said "I liked that one and not the other". They did not leave their cities to be entertained or to mark these manifestations of holiness out of ten: to do so would be to totally miss the point and trivialise worship into a spiritual "X Factor" or "Strictly". I am sure none of us would do that today!?

So let us learn from this apparently remote piece of history. Let us submerge ourselves with minds and hearts open to the constant renewal of the Holy Spirit in whatever worship the Grace of God offers. In doing so, our diversity will become a sure foundation for mutually respectful and loving unity.

Amen