

Anna told us last week that we're going to be in the book of 1 Corinthians for our readings over the next few weeks. So I thought it would be helpful to set ourselves in the context of the book, before we jump into exploring this specific passage.

Corinth was a big, wealthy, cosmopolitan city - side by side, people of different ethnicities and religions lived in harmony - it was home to Jews and Greeks and Romans - all of whom seem to have lived relatively happily alongside each other - pulling together for the common good of their city.

And it was good city - it was a vibrant place to be.

It was a port city which had access to both the Aegean and the Adriatic Seas - and with that came markets - it's central market was bigger than any of the markets in Rome - filled with goods from all over the world, but as was, and is, the case with port cities - there was also a lot of prostitution, and you'll notice as you read this book that there's an awful lot about sexual morality in this letter.

Ultimately that's what it is - a letter - a letter from St Paul to the church he'd established several years before in Corinth. It's clear from several references in the book that the church had written to Paul asking for some clarifications - at the start of chapter 7, we read: 'Now for the matters you wrote about...' before Paul gives some instruction. It's part of a conversation... backwards and forwards between Paul and the church at Corinth... but unfortunately only this half of the conversation survives!

Last week, we had the beginning of the letter: Paul's greeting and the explanation that his pal Sosthenes was helping him - probably with the writing - and before he started off with any other teaching or any other rebuke or any other comment... he tells them that he gives thanks to God for them. That's an important lesson, isn't it? Before we do anything else - before we pass any other comment... give thanks to God. As I was preparing for this morning - I was struck by that - so I want you to know that I give thanks to God for you - for your love and encouragement and willingness ... praise God. I give thanks to God for you.

Paul doesn't pack any punches though, parchment's expensive and so having said hello and having given thanks to God, he sets right about telling the Church at Corinth what's what, and what they're doing wrong. So here we are in our passage for today. Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you but you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose

Some things never change.

In fact: Psalm 133 begins with the words 'how good and how pleasant it is when God's people live in unity'...

God's people have ALWAYS been called to live in unity, free from divisions... but apparently we've had a problem with that from the very beginning.

How much that must grieve the heart of God.

This week is the week of prayer for Christian Unity. Started in 1908, and organised by the world council of churches, the 8 days between 18th and the 25th January every year are designated as

time to pray for one another across denominations across the world - that there should be no divisions among us but that we should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. The theme for this year is Be longing, which has been hyphenated as be and longing. Belonging. We belong to one another as to Christ, but the tag line is be longing for unity amongst injustice. The materials for prayer and reflection around this week have been put together by Churches in Minneapolis, where the murder of George Floyd sparked a global cry of Black Lives Matter. These resources are available online - I'd encourage you to go looking for them because they're fantastic and utterly thought provoking.

In that place of division - where a white police officer - tasked with public protection - murdered a black man in cold blood - sparking protests the world over - the churches of Minneapolis have come together to speak prophetically to the churches of the world that now is our time to stand together united - to be longing for God's kingdom of peace and justice.

I wondered whether I wanted to say something about the elephant in the room within our own church - the publication of the LLF materials, and the leaks and the comments and the media speculation - do you know what? There's time and space to talk and pray about that - but right now, I want to just name that before God, and hold on to our ecumenical desire for unity - this week is to pray for God's church in the whole world - not to become so insular that we only focus on the Church of England.

Last year, I was honoured to attend the Churches Together in England national forum, as part of the Church of England's delegation. These forums happen every three years, and representatives from all denominations and free churches gather together to listen to each other, to pray and to worship. I'm not exaggerating when I say it was one of the closest experiences I've had to heaven on earth. But it came so close to mirroring the worship of heaven because we all worshipped together. For those few days in Derbyshire, we put aside our differences and we focussed only on the Lord Jesus - the one who unites us in mind and purpose.

Paul's letter continues 'there are quarrels among you. 'I belong to Paul.' 'I belong to Apollos' 'I belong to Cephas'... Sounds familiar doesn't it? 'I belong to the Church of England.' 'I belong to the baptist Church.' 'I belong to the Methodists'... Has Christ been divided?

Lord have mercy.

Thirty years ago, a British teenager who was waiting for a bus was murdered. This week of prayer for Christian Unity, we join with the other churches in Britain and Ireland to remember Stephen Lawrence. We honour his parents who fought tirelessly for justice in the face of institutional racism. But how little has changed in our society. How deeply ingrained our racism. How deep our divisions and differences.

It's rather easy to stand here and say that.

But what am I going to do about it?

Well first off, I'm going to suggest that we pray.

We are just going to hold a moment of silence, acknowledging those who are the victims of racism and of hate. We hold them before God, acknowledging that we don't know their names, that their stories are unheard, that justice has not been done.

Reading this passage again, its clear that divisions between us as Christians is far from God's ideal for us. I wonder if we ever do make time to sit with and listen to our brothers and sisters who face

injustice? Who suffer persecution? Even those who simply worship differently but share our love for the Lord Jesus? I'm not suggesting we all decamp to Methodist church next Sunday instead of coming to St Brandons... but one of the joys of the pandemic has been the increase in streamed services - my Nan was telling me earlier this week that she's taken to watching services from a church in Australia - finding absolute joy in worshipping with them in a way that's totally different from her own church background. This is a call to seek out brothers and sisters who have stories to tell.

As churches, may we no longer be divided. May we be longing for the Kingdom where we all truly belong together. May we be united in the same mind and purpose: to stamp out racism and injustice and xenophobia. May we be united in modelling God's radical Kingdom because by this shall everyone know that you are my disciples - that you love one another.

Getting that right amongst ourselves would be a massive step - the best witness to our God who loved the world so much that He sent His only Son into the world to die for us...

Perhaps if we put aside those things which divide us and love one another, and worship together the God who unites us - we will no longer be longing for unity against injustice - we will be a church where all do truly belong.