

As I was thinking what to speak about this week from the three readings, I was struck by the Second Reading from St Paul, and by the contrast in style between Saint Paul and Jesus. A famous scripture scholar 40 years ago, CH Dodd, wrote a book called "The Founder of Christianity" and some people asked if the founder was Saint Paul or Jesus. Jesus of course is the Divine bedrock and source of all teaching, but Saint Paul was the great missionary and evangelist. He went everywhere, spreading the gospel, whereas Jesus stayed in the Middle East.

Both Paul and Jesus were teachers but very, very different in style. In Jesus we see His miracles and His Divinity. He was a healer, a visionary, and He could read peoples minds and souls. He had a sense of what a person was about, but His teaching was in parables and stories and images. When we look at Saint Paul, he was a brilliant writer as we see from his letters. He was a great organizer. He dealt with ideas and concepts and philosophy and morals. He was a great moraliser. Very rarely do you see Jesus teach on any form of morality. You see Him teach on justice and charity, but very rarely on morals.

Again today we have a very powerful reading from Saint Paul. It's got three important points about Christian life, and our lives within the Church. Paul had to deal with Church life and organisation, unlike Jesus who just dealt with the sense of spreading the Gospel, the Good News from God, and left others to do the organization. Paul's first point is, "DO ALL YOU CAN TO PRESERVE THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT BY THE PEACE THAT BINDS YOU TOGETHER." That became a catchphrase in the Early Church. "Do all you can to preserve the unity of the spirit by the peace that binds you together." That is based on the sense that God is One - we have one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, and we followers of Christ should also be one body and united together.

This idea of unity - one body - was invoked by Saint Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage in the third century. He was a wonderful man, very saintly, and he was following the Eastern Catholic tradition he had inherited. Easter was celebrated on a different date in the East, and this clashed with what happened in Rome. Stephen, the Pope, who was a bit of a hot headed person compared to Cyprian, wrote to him and said, "You must celebrate Easter by the Roman formula." Bishop Cyprian said "Look, we've always done it this way, so we're going to stick to what we've always done. Pope Stephen wrote back and said, " We need unity of practice in the Church. We need to celebrate Easter at the same time, if you don't, I'll excommunicate you." Cyprian, being very saintly, wrote back and said, "Look, let's do everything to preserve the unity of the spirit in the peace that binds us together." Cyprian had this great sense of one Lord, one faith, and that we need to be one in FAITH with others. It was this principle which informs our Catholic belief that any interruption to, or sacrilege of the liturgy is seen as a grave sin - breaking our peace with God AND one another in the Eucharist.

The second point of St Paul is to "BEAR WITH ONE ANOTHER CHARITABLY IN COMPLETE SELFLESSNESS, GENTLENESS AND PATIENCE" A VERY high ideal, but one which we are called to strive after. Charity, is a powerful command that we deal with others charitably. That's LOVE of neighbour, to every person we meet, whether we like them or not. That's a very hard thing to do, but we should try to love in complete SELFLESSNESS, GENTLENESS and PATIENCE - three tremendous Christian virtues.

So, this principle that Paul's elucidating is a very important one because, if you take the virtue of CHARITY/LOVE to, and for all seriously, then you CAN'T focus on self, on my dignity, my needs, my approach to things. SELFLESSNESS is about looking at the other, and considering their needs GENTLENESS is about not retaliating, but it doesn't mean you can't be firm. It means not being violent in our reactions - being PATIENT and giving the person a chance to change through the grace of God.

Finally, the third point in that beautiful Second Reading reading, which I found very powerful was, I IMPLORE YOU (meaning all of us, everyone in the church here today) TO LEAD A LIFE WORTHY OF YOUR VOCATION. Today we tend to think that vocations concern just the priesthood and the religious life, but Saint Paul is saying, ALL of us have a vocation. ALL of us have been called to lead a life worthy of our baptism. ALL of us are called to live out fully our Christian calling, our Christian life. Paul says quite clearly that we have been called to be different from the World, to witness to the truth of Jesus Christ, and to spread the Gospel message in word and deed.



