

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany. February 4, 2018. 1 Corinthians 9:15-23.

There are some who say 'everything has a price'. Even if we want to get the news it costs. The cost of the electricity to power our TV. The cost of the internet connection for our computers. The cost of a newspaper. What about the 'good news'? How much does that cost?

In today's epistle we heard Paul say to the Corinthians "in my proclamation I make the gospel free of charge" (1 Corinthians 9:18b). The gospel, the good news is and should always be free. It is another way of saying it is a gift from God, which is what grace is all about.

1 Corinthians is a letter to a church in crisis, yet also a place where Paul sees life and hope and opportunity and sees God present even in the mess. They are certainly in a mess! The church community in Corinth was deeply divided, inward looking, operated in ways which showed deep prejudice and arrogance and they had a narrow grasp of the good news. Paul loved them just as much as he realised they needed a swift kick. And so this letter is a mix of encouragement and rebuke, and throughout Paul is determined to draw the readers deeper into what life in Christ is really about.

Paul doesn't write them off despite how strange and askew they have become. He recognises that at the heart of some of their problems are actually some deep opportunities waiting to be discovered. They show a passionate 'party spirit' which has been expressed as divisiveness. That same passion has the seeds within it of a passionate grasp of diversity in unity once they see their differences not as stumbling blocks but as gifts to share with each other. We are all different from one another and we like different things. Thank God! That difference makes us more interesting and with more to offer each other rather than making us rivals or competitors.

One of the elements of the narrowness which afflicts the Corinthians is a desire for control. To enter the Christian community was, in the eyes of some, an agreement to conform and to put aside their past. This is not uncommon, ever since and even today. The Corinthians were wanting people who joined the community to be controlled by their perspective on the gospel. There was a cost to the gospel and the cost was obedience to their particular interpretation of it. Dr. Muriel Porter has written about the rise of fundamentalism in the Anglican Church, particularly focussing on the renegade Diocese of Sydney and the way it operates. We see the same narrow desire to control people in that Diocese.

When individuals or communities operate like this they are being what some have called 'gatekeepers of salvation'. Restrictions are placed on the narrow gate of what is acceptable. Of course there are some fundamental aspects of the Christian faith which are held in common. We find those in the creeds and in our liturgy, especially baptismal liturgy. But as soon as communities try to restrict new perspectives and new ideas and suggestions from newcomers because these ideas are different from how things have been done in the past in a particular place, or trying to say there is only ONE way to interpret the treasure God has placed in our hands, then those communities are putting a cost on the gospel.

This is, in the Church year, the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany. Each year we have this pattern of Sundays which run between Epiphany and the beginning of Lent, but they are not just space fillers. Epiphany is a season for being opened up to the world around us, being opened up to the people who are beyond what we might recognise easily or immediately as the church community. Epiphany was Jesus being revealed to people who were beyond the Jewish community into which He was born. The Gospels and other readings we have in these Sundays invite us to look more deeply at the way we engage with the people on the fringes and beyond.

Where and how do we meet people who God is inviting us to connect with? Do we meet them only when they come to us and only on our terms? If that is all we do then we need to hear again the gift of the gospel, the challenge of the good news, the words which Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth.

Paul's invitation is to meet people where THEY are, not only where we are, where they are and not where we want them to be. And when those encounters happen ... to give the good news, to give it, to share it without insisting that it be accepted on our terms! People are drawn to Christ in many different ways and along many different paths. Part of the stagnation of the church in the past has been that we have tried to channel and compress religious experience into narrow bounds.

Frank L. Crouch, commenting on this passage in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, wrote: "[Paul's] words suggest that people in relationship with Christ actually want to understand what matters to those who are not. They actually want to act toward others in ways that demonstrate respect for their status as human beings created and beloved by God - even before or apart from explicit relationship with God."

What Crouch is saying is that caring for others and wanting them to know Christ as we know Christ means finding out about them and discovering where God is already there, present and active and celebrated in their lives. It is a call to respect people for who they are.

So, then, incorporating new members into a church community is not a matter of ensuring conformity, it is not about finding the lowest common denominator but it is about engaging in real deep listening which ensures a rich diversity can flourish and people are truly welcomed for who they are and what they bring. Paul treated people well because each person matters – not as bums on seats but as people in whom God is already active and who are already loved and known by God. That is what he wanted the Corinthians to grasp. In chapter 8 of this letter Paul's exploration of how to respond when people are disturbed by Christians eating meat which had been sold after having been offered to idols in the local markets (as all meat was) showed his deep concern to respect those who were still exploring faith in Christ. Paul strove for respect, and to show that respect he became – as he put it – all things to all people. He did that SO THAT he could 'win them for Christ'. He wanted to make connections.

Stan Mast, another commentator on Paul, talks about the expression 'winning people to Christ' which can be seen and used in the sense of 'we are right completely you are wrong so all you have to do is let go of everything and come to our way of thinking and acting and all will be well'. That is rubbish actually and deeply disrespectful. Stan's words re-emphasise what I have been saying. He wrote:

"In other words, to win people to Christ, Paul didn't stay in his own little world, safe in the holy huddle of the church. Rather, he entered into the lives of those outside the church. He identified with them, adapting to their lifestyle, becoming like them, as much as he could without violating God's law and without compromising his own central Christian convictions. Instead of saying, "Come over here and become like I am," Paul always began the process of winning people by "going into the world" and becoming like they were."

This is giving without cost, without a fee or price for the gospel. What will we look like if we hold the gospel and share the gospel and live the gospel as Paul did? How open will our doors and our hearts and our minds be? How willingly will we embrace not only change but the ideas and gifts which come to us in and through the people who come new and fresh into contact with this community? Including those who are here this morning. I wonder ...

Paul Mitchell