

Sermon for the third Sunday of Epiphany at St Mary's 22nd January 2017

1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23 - The Man with Two Bibles

When President Trump took the oath of allegiance on Friday, according to the report on the radio, he had his tiny hand on two Bibles, one of which was the one which Abraham Lincoln used, and the other was one which his mother had given him. It makes you think that the Bible must mean something to the new president.

Using two Bibles in this way reminds me of a story which I heard about a rich old man who had two Rolls Royces. Somebody once asked him why he needed two. He wasn't a car collector. However, he said, he felt better having two, just in case one broke down. So perhaps Donald Trump needs two Bibles, just in case one breaks down.

'Wait a minute', you will say. One of the things about the Bible is that it is utterly reliable. It's even better than a Rolls-Royce. It doesn't break down. All you need in life is holy scripture, 'sola scriptura', only scripture, in Latin. But different churches say different things here. There are, perhaps, some differences of emphasis.

Today is the Sunday in the middle of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I must confess that my heart does sink a little bit when I realise that I have to try to say something useful and enlightening about the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, especially when we have a lesson like the one which we had today from St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. St Paul ticks them off. '... each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.' St Paul says, Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptised in the name of Paul?'

Poor old Corinthians. They are always getting ticked off by St Paul. It's one of those points where I have to say – and I think some of you will

agree with me - that I feel rather sympathetic to those Corinthians. Why am I an Anglican? Why is somebody else a Methodist? Or for a Wee Free? A Baptist? Or a member of the United Reformed Church, or indeed Roman Catholic? And is this a good thing?

When you read a lesson like the one we've read from 1 Corinthians, It's an 'oh dear' moment. It looks as though, although for hundreds of years, the church has been divided into lots of different denominations, everybody seems to turn a blind eye to these Bible passages which suggest that we should be all one church.

We can trace back the various splits and disagreements which have given rise to the different denominations. For instance the original split between the church in Byzantium and the church in Rome, the orthodox and the Roman Catholics respectively; and then in the time of the Reformation - 500 years ago this year - Martin Luther posting his 95 theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg, and starting a movement which split the Western Church into Roman Catholics and Protestants. The Protestants themselves were divided, mainly between those who were Lutherans and those who followed Calvin and Zwingli, the reformed Christians. And there were - there are - Baptists as well!

This isn't going to be a sermon where I try to teach you all about the various differences in theology and the philosophy of religion as it has evolved down the ages; why, for example, the Anglicans and the Roman Catholics have not moved together – after all, Henry VIII was a jolly good Catholic, the only problem being that he had some local difficulty with the Pope.

Apart from that, Henry had no difficulty with the Catholic doctrines, of transubstantiation, according to which the bread and wine in holy communion actually become the body and blood of Christ; and the blueprint or route map of heaven, what happens to people after they die: that their souls go to a place called purgatory, where all the sins are

laundered from the souls. Possibly laundry is too nice an image; it is more like the refiner's fire.

Not a nice process, but after that you were ready for your encounter with St Peter at the Pearly Gates. Henry had no difficulty with all of that; but of course Martin Luther did. He was particularly opposed to the Catholic Church's system of indulgences, according to which you could pay in order to shorten your time in purgatory. It was very lucrative for the church but it didn't have any basis in holy scripture.

Martin Luther wanted to strip out all these things that were not in the Bible but which had grown up in the church's tradition. 'Sola scriptura', only scripture, was his motto, his byword. Calvin and Zwingli, on the other hand, as well as relying on scripture, like Luther, did not like the traditional idea of a priest, as someone standing between the believer and God, somehow mediating worship. That Catholic idea was based on the Jewish concept of the priesthood, according to which an ordinary mortal who came into contact with God would die.

The trouble with having a priesthood is that you start to have a hierarchy, 'princes of the church' among the bishops, living in splendour in complete contrast with the simple life enjoined on his disciples by Jesus. In reaction against that, Calvin introduced the idea of the 'priesthood of all believers'. God would meet anyone, directly, face to face in prayer or worship.

Why would you follow one form of theology rather than another? Surely what the Bible says, if you follow what St Paul has written to the Corinthians, is that splitting up into all these different churches is an aberration. Somehow we have all got lost on the way. True believers will all just belong to one church, whatever that is.

At that point, of course, all of you in the pews mentally shift from one foot to another, with your eyes cast down, thinking privately that it's hopeless, after 2,000 years of history and because of the way that all of

us have been brought up in different traditions round the world. There is no chance of abolishing all the various denominations in favour of a single unified church, and the idea of having to go to a single church may well fill us with some trepidation.

‘Our beliefs are not one-size-fits-all’, you will say. You might even say, ‘My God is not like your God.’ I have always found it rather difficult when people talk about ‘my God’, because it seems to me that God does not belong to us, but rather that we belong to Him. So saying that something or someone is my God, mine, is nonsense.

In your mind’s eye, even if not out loud, you are probably thinking, ‘I don’t want the churches to be all just like so-and-so down the road. Just think, they might make me wave my arms around or clap in time to a guitar, or have to smell incense!’ - or, indeed, whatever it is that you get sniffy about in other churches.

But I think the thing that you need to take into account is the idea that is behind what St Paul is saying to the Corinthians in our lesson today. In effect, it is not what the Corinthians want that matters, it isn’t that they must have that great thing, that we celebrate so much in our society today, namely, choice, it isn’t that: It isn’t up to them, it isn’t up to the Corinthians: it’s up to Jesus himself.

What would Jesus say about, ‘I belong to Apollos’ or ‘I follow Paul’? Or, I’m a Methodist, I’m a United Reformed? I’m a Roman Catholic, or an Anglican? I’m a high Anglican. I’m a low Anglican. I’m a middle of the road Anglican. I’m an Evangelical (Godfrey will tell you more about that, of course); or I’m an Anglo-Catholic. Every shade and nuance is catered for. What do you think Jesus would think about that?

What St Paul says is, ‘Christ did not send me to baptise, but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.’ In other words, the key thing is for people to hear the gospel, and in particular to hear about Christ’s

passion and death and resurrection: to hear about the role of the cross which is at the heart of it.

Provided we get the Gospel, nothing else really matters. I don't think that Jesus would particularly care whether we like a particular church or a particular style of worship or not. The more important thing is that Jesus gets to be believed in by more people. So my feeling is that is that, although there might be moves to get closer to each other in the various denominations, moves such, for example, as ARCIC, the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission, or more recently the conversations between the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury, or the covenant discussions between the Anglicans and Methodists, still, you can give yourself a break; you can smile sweetly at your friends in the other churches, particularly in this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: you can take the opportunity to go and visit each other's churches and worship with them. But you don't have to give up being based at the church you've always gone to, where your friends are.

You definitely can be confident that we all, all of us in Churches Together in Cobham, Oxshott, Stoke D'Abernon and Downside, are united, united in that we believe in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ; so I think we wouldn't get ticked off like the Corinthians were.

Mind you, going back to Donald Trump and his two bibles, as Canon Giles Fraser has written recently in his 'Loose Canon' column in the Guardian

[\[https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2017/jan/19/donald-trump-faith-has-become-the-perfect-alibi-for-greed\]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2017/jan/19/donald-trump-faith-has-become-the-perfect-alibi-for-greed), President

Trump does go to a different sort of church, different from any of the ones round here, a church called Marble Collegiate Church on Fifth Avenue in New York, where the minister is, or has been, the Rev Norman Vincent Peale. Mr Peale has published a book called 'The power of positive thinking' and has developed a theology, if you can believe this, of how to be a winner, how to be successful in business. It

seems to be a sort of 'prosperity gospel'. To be blessed, in that congregation, means to be rich.

Giles Fraser wrote, 'When Trump was asked what God is to him ... he came up with this: "Well, I say God is the ultimate. You know you look at this ... here we are on the Pacific Ocean. How did I ever own this? I bought it 15 years ago. I made one of the great deals, they say, ever. I have no more mortgage on it as I will certify and represent to you. And I was able to buy this and make a great deal. That's what I want to do for the country. Make great deals."

Awful, isn't it. And it came from something at least pretending to be a church. Now what that means is something which we ought to be thinking about, especially in this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant