

Bibliophile #6

Paul's letters to the church at Corinth:

Messy Church

The term messy church is now used by those who wish to experiment with the practice of worship. It is the kind of term which could have been used of many of the churches to which Paul wrote. They are in a mess.

The issue that presented themselves are not always the same as the ones which would feature in a church council meeting these days. The most divisive issues surrounded circumcision and whether one could eat food which had been dedicated to idols. In the case of the church at Corinth the disputes are wide-ranging. That this should have been the case leads to the interesting matter of how then does Paul deal with conflict. The first response is rather simple: he does not sign up for conflict management course! There are other strategies he observes.

In his initial greeting Paul declares the authority by which he speaks: he is 'called to be an apostle [one who is sent] of Christ Jesus by the will of God' (1:1). He has not applied for this job; it is not because he has the specified competencies. It is a +vocation that is part of the purposes of God. Paul is always grounding the advice he gives in this style of understanding. Over the last couple of weeks we have heard him deal with the difficult relationships within the church at Corinth through his referring them back to the 'word of the cross'. For Paul the word of the cross is both the crucifixion and the resurrection. He will speak of both the foolishness and the wisdom of God.

In this week's reading Paul undermines the tendency for groups to organize themselves around leading figures and who baptized whom. It is not who performed the rite that is important. It is what baptism signifies. It is the way in which we participate in the death and rising of Christ: it is through our baptism that become 'co-workers' with God.

And here is a point worth noting: churches are often inclined to convert the gospel in set of moral do's and don't and let's do better. Sometimes that way of looking at things comes about because we feel like we may do something, some work 'for' Christ – but that is not how Paul thinks. He speaks about us being 'in' Christ. We may be 'infants in Christ' (3:2) but we are, nevertheless, 'in', not infants for Christ. Through being 'in Christ' we are God's 'field', God's 'building'.

Last week's reading placed weight on 'discerning'. It is the kind of word which should accompany talk of leadership, serving, following, imitating. Discerning is not about arriving at a consensus: for Paul it is about discerning 'the mind of Christ'.

