

Isaiah 9:1 - 4

Psalm 27

1 Corinthians 1:10 - 18

Matthew 4:12 - 23

### Living according to the economy of God: wisdom and division at Corinth

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As the ripples from the sub-prime mortgage crisis spread, on a daily basis nervous people await the stock exchange reports and examine the economic trends. Although this is a time of potential crisis, we are no strangers to thinking about the economy: it is part of our daily bread. It was one of the key issues in the election, and continues to be a subject of interest and concern.

The word “Economy” comes from the Greek, *oikos* – meaning house, and *nemein* – meaning manage: *household management*. While the production and consumption of goods and the exchange of money is primary for us, the economy also refers to *a way of ordering things in our household*: be it the state, city, family or church.

It may seem odd but the word Economy has developed a place in theology. A link has been made between God’s gracious dispensation towards us - in creation, and as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ - and what this implies for the *ordering of the household of God*: in other words the management of the church.

What the church stands for is the knowledge that in Christ, God has turned towards us and claimed us. Our unity in Christ is a gift that is present, waiting to be realized in our life together, which is why the Christian vocation is a call to community – fellowship with all who have been baptised into Christ. The challenge for the Church is to live in the mystery of this knowledge, to order its life accordingly, and to help others do the same.

As a result of his encounter with God’s grace Paul ceased to follow his own desires and began to live out his calling to help the Gentiles to live ‘in Christ’. Despite having founded the Corinthian congregation on this basis, news came via Chloe’s people that coherence had given way to division. When division comes it is often because of fear or grandiosity. Richly endowed with prophetic speech and knowledge, the Corinthians had individualised and exaggerated their gifts, believing they had already arrived at the fullness of Christian life. Jealousy and petty strife developed as people declared allegiance to different people. When they said “I belong to Apollos, Cephas and Paul they meant “I belong to Jesus Christ as mediated by this preacher!” Competitiveness factionalised the congregation drained its gifts and resources and made a mockery of its unity in Christ. It was a dangerous situation. Paul was anxious these divisions did not develop into full-scale differences where people became entrenched in self-serving doctrinal and ideological positions that destroyed the community. He reprimanded all four groups - even those who said: “I belong to Christ”. Even the right theological credential used to demonstrate

arrogance or exclusivity misconstrued the deeper meaning of what it means to live in Christian fellowship. There is only one Christ, and if you belong to him it is trivial whether you attach to Paul, Apollas or Cephas.

Paul's appeal for unity did not mean the Corinthians had to formulate identical theologies. The test was whether they were able to return to being at one in their commitment to the truth, while seeing all their formulations as partial, even their grasp of the truth found in Christ. It meant realizing the Church does not live by its own choices. It lives because of God's claim over it revealed in the Cross of Christ. In this respect Christians see through a glass darkly. There will always be more for us to learn, and with Christ as our teacher, perhaps especially so. This realization means accepting a humble position not an arrogant one. It also means privileging the positive - what truly joins rather than divides us.

What all members of the Church have in common is not something of their own creation, but a gift given to them: a relationship with Christ. He is the permanent expression of God's love for us, from whom we derive our sense of identity, meaning and worth. When divisions arise in the Church we must not compromise our loyalty to Christ - and to each other - for he is not divided, and his gift creates us as sisters and brothers and friends. His wisdom, most deeply revealed on the cross, provides the basis for the ordering of the church's life: the economy in which we live.

The divisions at Corinth are symbolic of a difficulty the church has known from the beginning until now: there are always parties whose loyalties introduce contention and strife and threaten the unity of the body of Christ.

How are we to respond? What wisdom will we apply? According to Paul, the measure we apply is not one of our own. We seek to live according to the message of the Cross. The power of God's love for the world, revealed in the cross, is the basis for our life together. This means when we face divisions, we give priority to what we know about God's choice of us, and all that implies for living in Christ.

How might that work out in practice? Karl Barth, one of the twentieth Centuries most prolific theologians is well known for the deep reservations he had about much of nineteenth century Protestant theology, especially that of Friederich Schleiermacher (1768 - 1834). Barth said that even in his day, 100 years later, Schleiermacher's influence continued as a mindset so that when people read Paul, they did so with the eyes of Schleiermacher. Barth had a complex relationship with Schleiermacher's work. He read him thoroughly, unravelled his arguments and stood them on their head, and even asked whether Scheiermacher's Christ really is the revelation of God. (Webster, p 38). Yet a basic respect remained. Barth did not regard Schleiermacher as a theologian to follow. Yet he urged his students to study him, not in order to condemn, but that they might handle him modestly and comprehend him as he was in his context. He did not say: "Schleiermacher is not in the church." He maintained a respect that was based on something deeper. Ironically Barth's own identity, meaning and purpose can only be explained by realizing that he and Schleiermacher were both servants of Jesus Christ and members of the church.

In his Australia Day speech the Governor General said his oath of office committed him to work for Australia to be a happy, coherent and tolerant society. This was his

basis for the household management of the nation, and embodies sentiments we can hardly quarrel with. But if as Bonhoeffer said the church is the secret centre of society, whose inner life contains clues for a well-ordered world, what would we as church contribute to the values of our nation? Corinthians suggests God's love for the world, revealed in the Cross gives the transformative perspective, which affects our identity, meaning and purpose. It shows that all people have been dignified by a love that is almost beyond imagining, a basis for transcending our petty differences. This light reveals that in the eyes of the one who truly matters we are no longer enemies, but sisters, brothers and friends, and we are to regard each other as such. This is knowledge the world badly needs. We are called to make it the basis for ordering things in our household – the church. And on Australia Day and every day, we are called to help others find this way of life.