

Third Sunday of Epiphany

23rd of January 2022

Readings:

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

Sermon:

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Ps. 19.

Today I would like to start our focus on the second reading, brought to us by Kris Pol.

Paul is talking to the sisters and brothers in Corinth. The town of Corinth in those days had a very multi-ethnic character. It was a big harbour town, placed very central in ancient Greece, right between mainland Greece and the Peloponnesus, between Athens and Sparta, controlling the very important Corinth Channel. So the people of Corinth were used to deal with people from all over the known world in those days. If we read a little bit between the lines in Paul's letters to the Corinthians, we can easily conclude that this melting pot of people came with certain tensions. Paul's problem was that these tensions between the different groups of the town's population had a negative effect on the Church in Corinth. The division that existed among the people of Corinth, also existed within the Church. That conflicted with Paul's idea about the Church. He explains that idea in verse 12: 'For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.' And verse 13 follows with these words: 'For in one spirit we are all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and we were all made to drink from one Spirit.'

When Paul speaks about 'Jews and Greeks, slaves and free', he just means 'everyone'. Their view of society in those days was quite simple: it was 'us' and 'them'. The Greeks talked about: 'Hellènoi kai barbaroi', Greeks and others; and it was quite obvious how they thought about these others, compared to themselves: they called them 'barbaroi', they were barbarians, it was the difference between the cultivated and the uncultivated world. Jews used to talk about 'Jews and Gentiles': Jews on the one hand and the rest of the peoples at the other. Us and them.

Back to Paul now: all members of the church were equal, according to Paul, whether they were Jews or not, free or slaves. That idea was quite unheard of in those days. Even Paul normally accepted the social status of slaves. But here

he acknowledges that, as believers, slaves were of equal standing as anyone else in the Church. Paul makes it very clear that all members of the Church, no matter where they came from or what their social status was, were equal members of the one body of Christ. And in this sense he wanted to correct the people in the Church of Corinth, who had brought social division into the Church; he expresses that like this: We are all baptized into one body, drinking of one Spirit. All these different members of the Church need one another; they can't be Church without one another. One member cannot say to another: you are less or I don't need you. We need one another to be Church. And when a certain member seems weaker than the rest, he is indispensable; and if a member looks less respectable than others, we have to treat them with greater respect. And if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; and if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. We can't do without each other; we can't be Church without each other.

Paul was talking about Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free. It would be helpful for us to ask what, in our context, in our own time, corresponds to the culturally-divided pairs in verse 13. Paul says that all the differences between the members of the Church are all overcome in baptism, and brought to surprising and profound unity in Christ. But what does that mean for our view on society? What are the differences in our society, to be compared with Jews and Gentiles, free and slaves? Should we say: black or white, Asian or African, American or from down under or from Europe; straight or gay or non-binary, single or married; citizen with a passport or undocumented; rich or poor; young or old, male or female. What about the homeless, or the mentally ill? Are all our members treated with the equality they are entitled to? Are we able to say that, no matter if they are slave or free, we include everyone? And what about the sinners? Are they equal partners in the kingdom? Paul is very clear, he follows Jesus himself in this: 'When somebody seems weaker, he is indispensable; when someone looks less respectable, we have to treat them with greater respect.' So yes, we have to include even the sinners, or should we say: sinners in particular, because they need it the most. When Paul says 'everyone', he means 'everyone', every single one!

And what is this really all about? What is Paul trying to say about the Church? In Corinth and anywhere else?

Paul wants the Church to be the foreshadowing of the Kingdom of God. And in God's eyes all are created after his image, male and female, no one excluded, everyone included.

And this brings us to the Gospel reading we heard today: Jesus explains to the people in Nazareth that on that day the Kingdom has come and is standing right in front of them. He referred to the prophet Isaiah with these words: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled.'

The kingdom has come. And it is up to the Church to proclaim it all over the world. It is up to the Church to foreshadow the Kingdom in its appearance. What goes in the Kingdom of God, goes in the Church. If we are asking ourselves if we are doing the right things in Church, we should ask ourselves: What would Jesus say or do? Does it fit in with the Kingdom?

This week we pray for the Unity of all Christians. At this moment I see two aspects to this unity. First of all the unity of the Kingdom of God. As Christians we have to be united. Each and every one can be part of the Kingdom of God. God created humans in his own image; we are all equal in his image. The Kingdom of God is an inclusive community; nobody to be excluded!

And the second aspect that deserves an exclamation mark: there are in this country hundreds of different Christian denominations; all over the world there are thousands. I can't find the verse in the Bible that says: 'create as many denominations as you can'. Unity and division cannot exist next to one another. Let us not only pray for denominations to come together, but let's do it! Starting with our neighbours, with other international Churches in the region and with Dutch Churches. A week of prayer every year should not become an excuse to become in-active in the ecumenical field.

Let us pray,

Dear God, you created one Church to worship you. We turned it in 'tohu habou' again, into chaos. Send your Holy Spirit to guide us on our path to unity; we ask in Jesus name. Amen.