

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...Isaiah 8, 23 – 9, 3

“One says: ‘I follow Paul’; another: ‘I follow Apollos’; another: ‘I follow Peter’; and another: ‘I follow Christ’. Christ has been divided into groups. 1 Corinthians 1, 12-13

Jesus said to Peter and Andrew: “Come after me and I will make you fishers of men.” At once they left their nets and followed him. Matthew 4, 12-23

If you’ve ever taken the time to closely observe how factions operate within our major political parties, then you’ll have some idea of what Paul is writing about in today’s second reading from Corinthians. The Christian community of Corinth obviously had its differences and, consequently, its faction-leaders who attacked one another in exaggerated fashion. Whenever any group has to deal with a range of different opinions among its members, it can very quickly find itself splintering into opposing factions which are inclined to cling stubbornly to their respective views and opinions. Factions mirror a group’s inability to deal with ambivalence around issues it faces or to cope with differences of opinion.

From what Paul writes, it would appear that factions among the Corinthian Christians were rife. Accordingly, Paul urges the members of the community to be “completely united, with only one thought and one purpose.” However, it would be wide of the mark to think that Paul was calling them to conformity. After all, in his letter to the Romans, Paul goes to great lengths to explain how people are different because they have different gifts and opinions and have grown up with in different traditions and with different cultural practices. These differences, he maintains, are blessings for any community. He even goes so far as to say that God deals differently with different consciences. So unity is not achieved by wiping away all visible differences, and one cannot use the Gospel to argue for such action. Paul, in fact, is trying to establish a basis for unity that takes into account that people are actually different in the ways they think and feel and act. His hope is that their devotion to Jesus will be what will help them to let go of the factions that they have rushed into establishing. He has no doubt that Jesus respects individuality and that there is no need to bolster support for individuality by creating divisive factions and recruiting supporters.

Today’s gospel reading gives us a parallel example of people working together in a group. Jesus puts together a team of disciples whose clear mandate is to work beside him in promoting God’s kingdom by calling people to conversion of mind and heart and by reinforcing the message by curing people of every kind of illness and disease. Using an image from how they made their living, Jesus invites them to get involved in fishing for human lives.

They, too, had to face the challenges that came from differences among them. Those differences, over time, have been developed by others into caricatures. Peter, for instance, is seen as impulsive, rough and inquisitive. John is commonly seen as gentle, faithful and sensitive. Andrew, by implication, is seen as having not much personality at all because he is described on several occasions as “also being there.” You will remember that they had their squabbles and petty jealousies from time to

time even though Jesus was constantly with them. Like the rest of us, they had to cope with the challenges of being human. To the bitter end, they struggled with differences within their ranks. After Jesus had well and truly gone from among them, Peter encountered extraordinary difficulties with Paul as two strong-willed and determined men argued about adult circumcision and what could reasonably be expected of Gentile converts to Christianity.

Underneath any struggle about difference in attitudes, views and opinions in any community is the fear that giving in to somebody might give that person more power. Elements of competition and vying for leadership come into play. While Jesus was around, order and peace prevailed. After his departure from the scene, the human struggles and squabbles that came when a whole mix of disciples, evangelists and preachers rubbed up against each other had to be dealt with. Factions developed and the adherents of each faction made it clear that leadership would be trusted only if it came from people who were different in the way they were different.

And that's the kind of struggle that the Church has had to cope with throughout history. The tragedy is that dealing with difference by slipping into faction fighting and creating polarities between conservatives and radicals prevents us from working collaboratively and cooperatively in the service of others in need. That amounts to senseless waste of human resources. What possibilities might open up if the liberationists, the charismatics, the Neo-Catechumens and the Legionaries of Christ all stopped being suspicious of one another and set out to work together?

Sadly, so many of us are afraid of difference. Somehow we feel we might be contaminated by radicals or conservatives. Until we are prepared to openly meet with and listen to the views of those who look different, we are destined to remain at a distance. We have to be courageous enough to seek common cause with them as allies of peace and justice for no other reason than that these were causes that Jesus espoused. There are people living and working around us who may not even know the name of Jesus, they may not see him quite as we do, with our own particular biases and bents, but they still resonate with the dream he had for our world. And when you think about it, people in need don't particularly care if help comes from the Salvation Army, World Vision or Caritas. In reality, no fish ever knows the fisherman's name!