

**Church of All Nations
Sunday January 26, 2025
1 Corinthians 12:21-31a**

Theme of unity and diversity today - body of Christ.

When I was minister at St Kilda Uniting my kids both attended the local primary school. There was quite an active parents group and we got to know quite a few. I think I was the only person from the St Kilda Uniting church that had kids at the school but a number of the St Kilda Baptist people had children. I had a vivid memory of a Sunday morning as I walked the 750 metres to the church from the manse. Along the way I met one of my friends who both attended the Baptist church and his kids were friends with mine at the school. So we had a bit in common. We walked along chatting away until we reached St Kilda Rd and we both looked at each other - this brother in the Lord, friend, kids play together. Well this is where we go our separate ways - me to worship God in that building and you to turn left and walk up that street to worship God in your building. And so we parted, until we would pick up our kids at the school. Later that afternoon. I continued the walk to church but could not get over the question, "Was that weird? That we share so much unity but also when it comes to the most critical thing - worship of God - we go our separated ways?"

The same must be experienced in countless small towns around the country when the town's population may be united and sharing so many things, maybe one school, one football and netball and tennis team, but the most divided the town is during the week is on a Sunday morning when people who played and barracked for the sporting team go their separate ways to worship God.

The letter (epistle) we call 1 Corinthians written around 53 or 54 CE a mere few years after Paul had established the church in this cosmopolitan Roman port. Corinth was a bustling, idol worshipping city. After living there maybe 18 months and establishing a church at Corinth Paul moves on to continue his evangelistic journey but reports of the goings on at Corinth reach him and cause him distress. He writes a letter attempting to bring the folk back to the unity which is the gift of the crucified and resurrected Christ. Divisions have erupted and show themselves in debauchery, slandering, immorality, misuse of the Lord's Supper and food sacrificed to idols. Tensions around Marriage, wealth

Wand so we only have this letter because of the tendency for Christians to squabble with each other and fall out. It all comes under the oft repeated heading, The Christian Church behaving badly.

The section of 1 Corinthians we read today has a strong Unity in diversity theme. And we like that in the UCA - talk of diversity, inclusion, unity - which is all good and I am a great supporter.

But Paul is at great pains in 1 Corinthians to say that the source of both the unity and diversity diversity is God, not human preferences, interests, convictions. We could go so far as to say diversity in not an accident but the intentions of God.

Differences not barrier to unity but a deepening of expression of single body of christ. Do not need to fear difference or see it as a problem to overcome. There is One spirit and one baptism

My concern is that we develop a hard won, robust, Christ centred inclusion. What I mean is that there is a soft version of inclusion, and there is a robust or hard won version of inclusion and diversity. The soft version says, maybe things would run a bit better if we had more people involved, or it is socially awkward to not have those people over there also part of our organisation, or we are middle class polite people and we cannot really say no to anyone.

Rather our diversity and inclusion is a costly - because once you say it is based on Jesus Christ and his life and ministry you immediately have to say it arises from his death and resurrection and the gift of the Spirit that unites us in this crucified and resurrected body of Christ. The church is inclusive not because it is a good idea and the polite thing to do but because each of us can say I am included. Because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ I have a place in the body of Christ.

But Paul equally makes it clear we are not talking about being a homogeneous blob of a body. - Unity does not overwhelm diversity.

Being male female, jew, gentile - categories not obliterated but unity is found with in them. This is the unity in diversity theme.

Mistaking unity for homogeneity is like the worst version of interfaith dialogue. I have been to a number of these gathering where everyone is on their best behaviour and find common cause and major in polite platitudes as we seek to affirm each other. What happens is we find the lowest common denominator - love each other, treat your neighbour as yourself, we are all human. It is like we put all our hard won convictions into a common blender, plug it in and turn it on and whizz it up and pour out the now homogeneous gloop for consumption.

I am not speaking against inter faith dialogue but making the point we have to move beyond the banal unity to find a much harder fought for unity in diversity where we can also speak openly and honestly of what makes us - each of us - distinctive. Our unity and our diversity are both God given.

Paul working with a body motif. Paul didn't invent this image himself, but he is employing and then subverting an image that was already well known to his hearers because it was commonly used to describe the nature and make-up of the nation. Two components to this image. One is making the point that when we all work together and co-operate and play our role then things go swimmingly. Everyone has a role, knows what it is, accepts it and puts in. And there is interconnectedness. The suffering of one impacts all. Negatively migraine will impact upon all functions - cannot talk, run, think, listen to music, work.

It gets a little more sinister when we go further and say and some are up near the top of the pile and others are below them and that is God ordained. You may remember the heretical verse of the old hymn "All things bright and beautiful" that said "The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, God made the high and lowly and ordered their estate." It is not in our current Together in Song as we have the Australianised version drawing on nature. But the ancient politicians and philosophers and the author of the original verse were saying blatantly or at least implying some people are more important and rightly have the more valuable and

honourable positions. Other people are of a lower class and there are less honourable and less important tasks available to them. And the nation or society is 'naturally' more careful to protect and care for those more important people because they matter more.

And Paul takes the image, applies it but at the same time subverts its hierarchical message of greater and lesser.

Using this body image or metaphor He talks of those parts which are the least respected and often hidden or covered. Commentators suggest there is probably a double entendre on the word "members" just as there is in English. Genitalia less respected, presentable so covered but essential in relationships and continuance of human race. Paul is calling for a dismantling of a hierarchical way of organising relationships, structuring a community or organisation. Or at least honouring those who usually receive little honour.

For a long time I have thought it bizarre that the most vulnerable people in our society - elderly, young, disabled are cared for by some of the lowest paid workers. Those who are most precious our parents, our grandparents, our children, our family members with disabilities are cared for by people our society says by the level of their wages - we do not have all that much regard or respect for your work. Here, have this ...

Quote - "the fruit and veggie pickers, abattoir workers, truck drivers, warehouse workers, nurses, childcare workers, garbage collectors, cleaners and many others whose daily work is directly essential for others' wellbeing generally earn much less than the average," and that if so "many of the people whose work is most valued by others in society are among those least valued by that society in a monetary sense" then surely there is "something fundamentally wrong with (economics,) a social science concerned with distribution."

List of low paid workers reminds me of the similar list during Bishop Budde's impassioned and extraordinarily brave part of the sermon when she directly addressed President Trump during a Prayer Breakfast during the week and implored him, in the name of God, to have mercy on many of those who are now fearful for their futures under his administration.

Most of 1 Corinthians is about Paul addressing the dysfunction in the church Brought about by divisions, causing the formation of within the one body, parties or that particular churchy word, "schism". In most of our churches, and throughout church history, schisms are due to *doctrinal* differences and conflict. But in this section of the epistle Paul is pointing to something that is shocking

Richard Beck points out that the schisms of the Corinthians church are schisms of *honoring* and *shaming*.

What was creating schisms in the church at Corinth wasn't doctrinal. What created the schisms was *the shaming of members of the church*, the shaming of "weaker" members who were considered to be "unpresentable," members who lacked honor in the wider culture.

The point in all this isn't that the gifts *exist* and that you and I have *different* gifts, but in how those gifts are *honored* or *shamed*. It's *the shaming of gifts* that is the issue.

The healing of schisms for Paul, then, is about learning how to honor properly. Christian community is learning how to honor less "honorable," "weaker," and "unpresentable" members. Division is healed when "the members have equal concern for each other." And this requires *rehabilitative* action in how we honor. The less honorable members require, according to Paul, "special treatment." In this we imitate God: God gives "greater honor to those who lacked it."

Healing of divisions is the work of the Spirit when we call upon the Spirit to restore us to the unity in diversity that is the gift of Christ.