

Epiphany 3 / January 22, 2023

1 Corinthians 1:10

“I appeal to you brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and judgement.”

One of the verses in the hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” pleads, “O Come, Desire of nations, bind in one the hearts of all mankind; Bid thou our sad divisions cease, and be thyself our King of Peace.” There are as many things that divide people as there are people. Division takes many forms, from the blatant discrimination of racial segregation, to the more subtle division of differing likes and dislikes. Division in some form is part of life in this world in bondage to sin, under the influence of the devil and the condemnation of death. Not all division is sinful or caused by sin. One person may be an Oilers fan and the other may be a Flames fan. It’s not sinful, just unfortunate. Life isn’t fair and not everyone has the opportunity to be raised properly as a Jets fan.

That being said, some division is a direct result and effect of sin. Jesus was born to bring peace, but even that is a cause of division, as some receive Him and others reject Him. In contrast to people’s expectations, Jesus surprisingly said, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Jesus came to bring God’s peace to humanity. Jesus made peace between God and humanity through the sacrifice of His cross. In the letter to the Colossians, St. Paul wrote of Jesus saying, “For in Him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace through the blood of His cross.” He is our peace through whom we have union with God.

Jesus made peace with God for every human soul through the sacrifice of His cross. Jesus offers peace to everyone through the gospel of forgiveness in His name. All who receive the gospel, who believe and are baptized in His name, are united with God and with each other in the sacrifice of His cross. There is union between believers and God in Christ. There is division, because while some receive Jesus, others do not. St. John wrote, “He came to His own but His own did not receive Him, but to all who did receive Him, who believed on His name, He gave the power to become children of God.” Faith in Jesus may divide us from certain people, but Jesus heals the division caused by sin. Faith in Jesus unites us with God in peace and through that peace, unites us with all baptized believers. In the cross of Jesus, we are united with God and each other in time and for eternity!

Christ unites us with God and with each other. So perhaps the saddest human division is when Christians are divided against each other. Jesus, the night of His betrayal, prayed for the well-being of the church in general and for the unity of believers in particular. His prayer was Father, “that they may be one as we are one.” In a certain sense we are one with each other and with God in Christ. In fact, this is the most important sense. All believers are incorporated into the body of Christ through baptism into His death and resurrection and faith in His name. The Church is the body of Christ on earth and despite outward divisions, it is united in Christ.

In the letter to the Galatians, St. Paul wrote, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” There may be differences in practice among believers and division because of understanding the scriptures. But in terms of our spiritual relationship with God, we are one in the Spirit and united in the name of Jesus. As St. Paul wrote in the letter to the Ephesians, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” The Church is united through faith in Christ Jesus and the sacrifice of His cross.

The fact that Christian groups are divided in terms of understanding and individual believers are separated by bitterness and animosity towards each other, is a sad testimony to the power and presence of sin within us and among us. Most importantly it is a sign that we do not truly see our own sin, or fully appreciate the grace of God that is in Christ Jesus. God’s word is truth. Unity in faith comes from unity in understanding God’s word. Unity in faith is not unattainable. God’s word is understandable. The Psalmist sang, “Your word O Lord is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” There is no darkness in a lamp and no shadow in light. If the word is unclear or the path dark, it is because we have covered our eyes, turned our backs, and clouded our minds.

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Jesus is the light of the world. His words are truth and life. Any darkness in understanding or confusion in following, comes not from Him or His words. It comes from us, our sin and misunderstanding. When the disciples misunderstood Jesus’ words, He told them it was because they were thinking like humans and not like God. Unity in understanding the scriptures comes from the Holy Spirit, who enlightens our minds to think according to the mind of God, expressed most clearly in Christ and the sacrifice of His cross.

The division in our text this morning is not primarily of understanding and teaching of God's word. Rather it is division caused by sinful pride. It is the sin of exalting ourselves and looking down on others. Paul has been informed that various factions exist in the Corinthian Church, based on the name of the person who baptized them and His status as a teacher. Some claim pre-eminence because they follow Peter, others Paul and others Apollos; as if they were in competition. The trump card was held by those who claimed to follow Christ. But if following Christ is reason to exalt ourselves over other believers, we are not properly understanding Him, or truly following Him.

Jesus said, "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first must be servant of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." If we truly believe that Christ gave His life as a ransom for all of us, how could we ever look down upon another Christian, speak evil of her, condemn him, or think we are better than they are? If we truly appreciated our sin, saw its horror and believed in Christ as our Saviour, how could we not deal with each other in forgiveness, or fail to hold each other up before God in prayer? Christ gave His life on the cross as a ransom for us all! We are united in the cross of Jesus. It is the power of God for forgiveness, unity and eternal life!

God reconciled the world to Himself through the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross. God offers this reconciliation to all people through the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus' name. God reconciles to Himself all who believe and receive baptism in Jesus' name. All who are baptized are joined to Christ and to each other in His death and resurrection, declared righteous, adopted as children, incorporated into the family of God and promised a share in Christ's resurrection to a new and eternal life.

We are reconciled to God and each other in the cross of Jesus. We are united in Christ. We share equally in the forgiveness of the cross. We are empowered by the Spirit to live with each other in a spirit of grace; showing compassion as we have been shown compassion, helping each other bear the burdens of life, as Christ helps us bear our burdens. We are united in Christ Jesus with God and with each other through the sacrifice of His cross!

God who has united us to Himself and to each other in the cross of Jesus, bless us with His Spirit and empower us to live in harmony with Him and with each other, as we share the peace of Jesus with others. In Jesus' name. Amen