

A church at the Coalface is one where....

- ... we use God's gifts to us

## Introduction

- Have you ever listened to one side of a phone conversation?
  - and tried to figure out what was being said?
  - sometimes it can be hard enough guessing who is on the other end of the line!
- That's a bit like what we are doing here in this part of the letter to the Corinthians!
- Paul is writing in response to a series of questions he's been asked and situations he has been told about:
  - he is writing his answers and advice, pointing the church in Corinth in the right direction.
- We don't have the question or series of questions that sparked off his discussion on spiritual gifts and how they should be used
  - which take up the next 3 chapters, and which we will be looking at over the next couple of weeks as well as this morning
  - but Paul's answer is helpful even without the exact question!
- A Christian who worked for SU in England moved house. He writes:
  - "I was looking forward to finding a new church to worship in. I had my list of what I was looking for: loud music, informality, uniqueness, something out-of-the-ordinary. I set out on my quest. A month later I find myself attending a primarily liturgical service, not a drum in sight and where the infrequency of hand-clapping has led me to question whether the congregation attend with them tied behind their backs! So, why am I here? Quite simply because of the love and the friendship of the ordinary people - not the preachers, the prophets, the healers and the teachers, but the rest of the body. For a true church has many parts.
- "A true church has many parts..."
- The New Testament knows nothing about Christians in isolation, but only about Christians as part of the church, worshipping and working together for the glory of God.
- In this part of his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul reminds his readers that this is indeed the case, and explores some of the dangers and some of the joys, some of the pitfalls and some of the satisfactions of living and working in such a community of faith.
- Most of all, though, Paul wants again to emphasise that it is the Spirit at work in the church, building relationship and giving gifts, that makes a church work.

## Three Dangers

- There are at least three dangers implicit in all that Paul has to say about the church and the way it functions:
  - and they all arise when the Holy Spirit is not allowed to be at work.

### Danger of Deflated Dignity

- First, the danger of deflated dignity!
- Danger of low self-esteem - of thinking that you don't matter.
- In any group of people there will very often be those:
  - who feel themselves on the periphery;
  - who don't feel that they matter;
  - who are uncertain of their place in the group, and their value.
- I don't know how many of you like Gilbert and Sullivan comic operas?
- Mikado: don't remember the character, but "he had his little list... and none of them would be missed"!
- Maybe that's how you feel - that you wouldn't be missed, that you are unimportant, non-essential.
- "Baloney!!!" says Paul!

- Church is a body - can't just cut out bit of the body without there being pain! Body can't function to its full potential with bits missing, or not doing their part!
- If you feel like that, there may be two things wrong:

#### You may have a wrong estimation of yourself

- forgotten that God loves YOU, died for YOU, called YOU to be part of his church, has given spiritual gifts to YOU.
- Remember: regardless of how we feel, that doesn't actually change the reality of the situation - we are still fully and critically part of the body, for it is God who made us what we are!

#### The Church may have a wrong estimation of you

- It may be that there is a climate of perfection.
- Everything has got to be done properly, professionally, smoothly:
  - and those who can't manage that should be excluded, or made to feel like second class citizens.
  - (not helped by professional, sometimes one-man-band style of ministry - tempting to leave it to the paid person!)
- Neither of those are the way God made the church to be.
- Rather, he brought us into the church that we might flourish and grow, secure in the knowledge that God loves us, able to try and things and learn from our mistakes without fear of cutting criticism.
- We are all critically important.

#### **Danger of Damaging Pride**

- Flip side of the the danger of deflated dignity is the danger of damaging pride.
- Rather than thinking too little of yourself, there can be the danger of thinking too much:
  - that you are especially important;
  - that you are at the centre, and able to do everything;
  - that you don't need others.
- Just as untrue an estimation of the relationships that exist in a church where the Spirit is at work as the previous danger!
- Pride tends towards division - I can do without you, I am better than you - rather than unity.
- Pride was the original sin: I can do it MY way, not God's.
- This a danger for congregations as much as individuals:
  - while we have much that is good in the way we do things, much that we can rightly share with others;
  - there is also much we need to learn from churches of other backgrounds, and from different countries.
- Pride damages, and so we need to confront it in ourselves and in our congregational life, so that we don't snuff out the Spirit's work amongst us.

#### **Danger of Deep Division**

- Third danger is that of deep division.
- Ironical that disagreements over spiritual gifts are some of the deepest and cause most disunity and hurt in today's church!
- Some say that tongues, prophecy and the more "spectacular" gifts were finished with at the close of the New Testament age...
  - ...while others go to the other extreme and suggest that you aren't really a Christian unless you display one or more of these spectacular gifts!
- What was Paul's response to this kind of talk?
  - Treat those who might otherwise be thought of as less honourable as special in the sight of God (v.22,23)!
- Turn our current values upside down!
- That means that we will consciously seek to value those whose gifts we would naturally think less of.

- perhaps if you are a musician, you find it easy to value the musical contribution of others, their skill and so on, and maybe do say to them "thanks" - make conscious effort to value the contributions of others, cleaners, administrators, welcoming person in the pews, whatever!

- That genuine effort to appreciate one another will destroy division and build unity.

## Three Joys / Satisfactions

- If there are at least three dangers in being part of a church fellowship when the Spirit is not allowed his place, there are also at least three deep satisfactions that come only when we are fully part of a Spirit filled fellowship...  
...three sources of intense joy in being part of the church.

### Satisfaction of Sure Acceptance

- First, the satisfaction of sure acceptance.
- It is my sincere hope that everyone here has somewhere they can go and be absolutely assured of acceptance:
  - they can go, and know that no matter what has happened, they will be welcomed, given time, a shoulder to cry on, a cup of tea.
- For most of us, I hope, that will be in our families - with our spouses, or our parents, or our brothers or sisters.
- For others, it will be with close friends, people who you've know and learned to trust over time.
- Having somewhere like that makes it easier to take risks in the rest of life, knowing there is somewhere safe to come back to if things go wrong.
- And there's a joy in deep relationships that the outsider can never guess at.
- That is what the church is meant to be like - a community where we are all accepted by one another because Christ has accepted us.
  - where it won't matter whether we're male or female;
  - where it won't matter whether we're from Fintry or Stobswell or Lochee or even Broughty Ferry;
  - whether we're Dundee born and bred, or an incomer;
  - whether we're Scots, or Irish, or English, or Welsh;
  - whether we're a high-flyer, or the dunce of the class;
  - whether we're unemployed, or ascending the career ladder;
  - whether you've been in the church all your days, or only recently arrived;
- Where none of those things are ever raised as things that divide us - perhaps not even in jokes, for what we mean as a joke can convey a message the very opposite of acceptance to the other person.
- Then there will grow the joy, the satisfaction of sure acceptance.

### Satisfaction of Shared Success

- Second, the satisfaction of shared success
- I don't know how many of you have ever played much team sport?
  - football; rugby; netball; whatever...
- If you've ever played with a team on a regular basis you'll know the satisfaction of shared success and the shared hardship too!
  - shared pain on the training field, physically exhausted but with your coach urging you on;
  - shared commitment in the dressing room, ready to go out and play;
  - shared joy when someone scores - the whole team rejoicing together, not just the scorer;
  - shared grief when you lose - a good team won't recriminate, but will pull together to do better next time.
- That team spirit is one of the things we should feel here in church, as we bear

witness together to our Lord and Saviour:

- as we train together here in church and in PM and BS's, knowing that God is chipping away at our sin and building us up in our faith;
- as we take on some task together, a parish visitation, preparing for a special event, or within a smaller group like the Bodybuilders leaders or the elders or the Action Team as we tackle a shared responsibility;
- as we rejoice together in success - as someone comes to faith, as another is restored to health, as yet another begins to exercise a new ministry;
- as we weep together when things go against us - someone falling away from faith, opposition from outside, whatever.

- That's what church should be like!

### Satisfaction of Sustaining Partnership

- Third, the satisfaction of sustaining partnership
- **Story: CrossTalk**
- SU training event; University student; good at some academic stuff, but pretty hopeless with my hands!
- George was an apprentice plumber; really nice guy; not an academic high flyer.
- Day long exercise - build a shelter, collect points, prepare some material for presentation later in the evening... team building, etc!
- Each had to contribute their part.
- Most of the time either I or one of the girls seemed to take the lead - but we were making a hash of building this shelter!!
- George took over - solid, robust shelter - was still standing in the grounds a couple of years later!!
- We did well overall because we were able to complement each other's strengths.
- I came to realise I couldn't build shelters; George knew he wasn't good at preparing material for the evening meeting.
- Together, though, we could do both! Great feeling of partnership, of satisfaction at a job well done, and of pride in one another's strengths:
  - I was chuffed to bits to have been in the same group as George, since otherwise we'd never have built such a good shelter!
- Should be same in church:
  - rejoice in the diversity, and delight to complement each other;
  - and see something truly wonderful let loose into the world!
- The satisfaction of sustaining partnership!

### Conclusion

- What a place the church turns out to be!
- A community of acceptance, of shared joy and sorrow, of exciting, sustaining partnership!
- A community where pride and low self-esteem should be banished, and division rooted out!
- A community worth belonging to!
- A community worth committing to!
- That's what God's Holy Spirit wants to build here amongst us!
- Let's commit ourselves to working with Him:
  - to striving to banish the atmosphere of perfection that drags people into feeling worthless;
  - to confronting pride, in ourselves and our church;
  - to opposing division whenever it appears amongst us;
  - to being those who offer sure acceptance;
  - to working together and enjoying shared success and hardship;
  - to seeing sustaining partnerships grow amongst us.
- Let's commit ourselves to being the church - as God meant us to be!