

Epiphany 3
22 January 2023
Worcester Cathedral

Ps 27.9, 1 Corinthians 1.10-18

Thy face Lord will I seek. The psalmist's words in response to God's call 'seek ye my face'.

To behold the face of God is awesome, terrifying, beautiful, and healing. It is too much for us and yet it is the deepest desire of our soul, the foundation of our spiritual being to gaze on the face of God and receive God's compassion, love, and salvation. It is the goal and the prize of our spiritual journey and we spend our lives seeking, finding, and then seeking again, that face of God. Until the day when we will see God face to face and dwell in his infinite and glorious light. It is an immense and sensational hope, beyond all our imaginings, and yet, we are promised that through faith in Christ we will indeed see face to face. Seek ye my face; thy face Lord will I seek.

Seeking the best can be both a rewarding and a frustrating experience. In a world of variety and choice it isn't always easy to find what we need, what we hope for, or what is good for us. It has become easier in some areas of life with the advent of comparison sites for example to find the best deal on energy prices or phone deals. But even visiting a small supermarket can overwhelm us with choice – a choice which we are told by marketing companies which is good for us.

This week I visited a supermarket and immediately as I entered I was offered the chance to try a new non-dairy milk. Never one to refuse a freebee I tried the small shot glass of potato milk and walked around the rest of the aisles with a rather unpleasant starchy taste in my mouth. Needless to say, I didn't buy a carton.

Much better are those taste tests where a selection of similar products are presented with their labels removed and people are encouraged to choose their favourite. These tests are nearly always set up to remind consumers that because a brand is famous, or the price is high, it isn't necessarily the best taste, quality, or value. I admit to enjoying a slightly smug delight in seeing some people's personal horror having chosen the cheapest, most unfashionable alternative as their favourite.

That people choose a product because of the brand is well-known. Brand loyalty is the cornerstone of marketing. And so it seems the same human tendency towards affiliating ourselves with a particular brand or personality was present within the

early Church. Paul is witnessing a taste-test and is frustrated by the childish pride by which some claim 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.'

Paul is writing in response to some concerning news he has heard about the church in Corinth. Members of the Corinthian church had written to Paul asking his advice on certain problems which had arisen in the life of the infant church in that city. That letter formed what was the official news from Corinth. But alongside that there was what might be called hearsay, even gossip, from Chloe's people - concerned about what they had witnessed; problematic, surprises which didn't appear or feel to be very Christian. Paul is writing to the Corinthians to address these concerns. He is aware of a wayward and divided church which falls short of the Christian community which he and the other apostles desired.

Living together in unity, with harmony, and without division or upset is at the heart of Christian life. Communion is essential: with one another as much as with Christ – Paul speaks at length elsewhere of our unity, our oneness in Christ. We are members one of another, sisters and brothers of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is no place for division or disharmony and Paul writes to call out this failure to live in communion. He speaks to the Corinthians of being 'united in the same mind and the same purpose'.

In this week of prayer for Christian unity we might well dwell on these words of St Paul about the nature of unity. We *know* that unity is not uniformity, but it is, as Paul says, about having *the same mind and the same purpose*. The sin of our division is not the variety and diversity of Christian witness (this is, in fact a gift of the Spirit), but rather our inability to acknowledge the mind and purpose of those who profess (just as we do) their faith in One Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, full God, fully human, who died and was raised for us and for our salvation, and will come again with power and great glory. This is our mind and our purpose – our mission and unity as God's people of infinite variety and calling.

The brand loyalty of those in Corinth is anathema to Paul. There is one Lord and we are all baptised into one Body – the Body of Christ. To say that we belong to Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas is of no relevance when proclaiming their Christian faith to others. They may well have been nurtured, taught, and baptised by certain individuals or groups within the tradition, and they may well rejoice in that diversity of approach, but they are not to proclaim themselves as having allegiance to such individuals and groups.

Are we not the same? Many of us will be delighted or honoured to have been baptised or confirmed by a particular priest or bishop, but we do not in any way think that such baptism or confirmation makes us better Christians. Likewise with our denominational adherence we may feel dutiful and responsive towards our church tradition but this is, and always must be, secondary to our calling to identify as Christians.

It is not always easy. Most of my formative years, and my ordination and first two ministerial appointments were in the Church in Wales and I can tell you how frustrating it is to be labelled Church of England when you are proudly Welsh in tradition if not birth. Re-labelling yourself as Anglican means little to people outside the church, but we do have our natural spiritual home and we are proud of that.

It is ok to have a preference, fine to like one style or community over another. It is natural that we are drawn to one more than another: part of what St Paul is referring to in his naming of those Christians who say 'I belong to Apollos' – they preferred the style of Apollos who was slightly more polished and eloquent than Paul the tentmaker. It is, often, a matter of taste how we are drawn into a particular company or tradition. And although it ultimately is of less importance, it is also relevant.

It is intriguing that in his list of brands, for the want of a better name, Paul refers to himself, to Apollos, to Cephas and then, mysteriously, to Christ: 'I belong to Christ.' One might think this would be fine, but Paul refers to it here disparagingly of those who claim purity of their call without the influence of others like himself, Apollos, or Cephas – a sort of superiority.

Our spiritual home within the Christian family is always centred on Christ - we are all members, one of another, sisters and brothers of our Lord; but we are fashioned, and nurtured, and drawn to the examples of those whose lives most reflect the truth of the Gospel. We are Christians joyful in our diversity but one in our allegiance. We delight in these peculiarities and flavours as long as they reveal the true taste of the Gospel.

Which brings us back to the taste test. Orange juice is orange juice. It can be expensively produced, or it can be dazzlingly packaged. It can be branded to suit our preference and our personality. But the proof is in the tasting. We know what we consume.

Christian Unity is often tested by a consumerist approach. We see other brands and formats and we are either drawn to them or we dislike them. But regardless of our own taste they remain sisters and brothers within the household of God's Church. Much of our energy can be all too easily spent on the taste test approach to ecumenism. This suits my palate, this does not; and in doing so we fall into the divisive branding which Paul warns the Corinthians against.

Perhaps there is another way to approach our longing for unity. Perhaps we are called first to taste-test our own faith. Are we dazzled by brand and style, or are we fully content that we see within ourselves the fullness of the life of Christ?

Our communion and unity with others is as much dependant on our own full-flavour of the good news as it is on others, and this is why we seek first the face of the Lord. Praying for the Lord's face to shine upon us with such fullness, that we reflect his image, and his alone.

Seek ye my face: Thy face, Lord, will I seek.

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