

Resolving differences

1 Corinthians 1, 10

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to You, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

I wonder if any of you have been watching the developments in Geneva with the Syrian peace talks? This is an attempt by the United Nations to try to sort out the seemingly intractable mess that is currently engulfing Syria; a mess that now has some astonishing statistics in terms of the humanitarian crisis.

At the last count, there were some 2.5 million Syrian refugees who had fled the country – that's over 10% of the population. Behind that figure, there is an even more astonishing statistic that as much as half the population of the country has moved to avoid the violence and get themselves to somewhere, either within or outside the country that they think may be safer for them and their families.

This is a humanitarian crisis on an unprecedented level so it's no wonder that the UN feel the need to try and get the Syrian government and the opposition talking to try to resolve the issues and find a way back to peace. So what's the fundamental problem here? Well, to understand that, we need to understand a little of the background to the population.

There are 23 million people in Syria and we, simplistically think of it as an 'Arab' country. This is a fairly normal Western simplification of a much more complex position. The population, ethnically, are all pretty much indigenous Levantine people who happen to speak Arabic, hence our shorthand referral to them as Arab. In religious terms, 74% of the population are Sunni Muslims with another 16% being other Muslims, chiefly Alawites with the rest being broadly Christian, apart from a small Jewish population.

The ruling class in Syria have, since the 1960's been almost exclusively Alawite rather than the majority Sunnis – a source of tension almost identical to that which led to the downfall of similar governments in Iran, Iraq and Egypt and one of the key drivers for the Arab Spring rebellions across the region.

For us Christians looking in from a distance, these subtle differences in creed can seem confusing – surely Muslim's are Muslims aren't they? Why can't they just get along? But of course, that is just like saying Christians are Christians and we should all recognise the authority of the pope or the Patriarch of Constantinople.

Unfortunately divisions, schisms and sects are as old as religion itself as today's reading from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth reminds us. Here we are right at the beginning of our young Christian church and already the cracks are beginning to show. The early Christian

church was setting a trend that the generations that came later doggedly followed – if we can possibly find something to disagree on then let's really go for it.

I've just been reading an excellent book that Elaine got me for Christmas entitled 'Our Church' by Roger Scruton which discusses what it is that makes the Anglican church so unique and I found his explanation of the early church to be really helpful in understanding this issue of argument and debate.

Disagreements have defined the Christian church and have also divided it. To the outsider, these disagreements seem trivial but to the true believer they have literally been matters of life and death. Our God, the God of the New Testament is a God of Love, on that we can all agree. Christ is the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world.

Thanks to the accounts of his miracles and most importantly, thanks to his death and resurrection, the very early Christians found themselves drawn to the fundamental belief of Christianity, namely that Christ was no mere prophet but rather the Son of God. From that came the inevitable conclusion that Christ is one with God, the Word made flesh and the point at which the timeless met with time.

The fundamental doctrine of the early Christian church was that Christ was one with God and to account for the continued presence of the Holy Spirit, one with the Spirit as well; a three person God, a Holy Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is the foundational doctrine and the central mystery of the Christian religion.

At the heart of all the upheavals that have shaped the forms and sects of Christianity; lie disputes about this doctrine and about the sacrament, the Eucharist that is its sensory expression.

During Paul's time and for a further 300 years, these differences of opinion lay buried and unsaid as the early church suffered repeated persecution. The church rallied around its persecution to project a united front in the face of adversity but that all changed when the Emperor Constantine was converted and suddenly Christianity became mainstream and acceptable.

One of Constantine's early acts as Emperor was to call together a great council of the whole church – the Council of Nicea in AD 325. The purpose of the council was to expose and stamp out a growingly held view as preached by the Alexandrian Arius that Jesus was not fully God since he has a beginning in time and is subject to change, whereas God is unchangeable.

This Arian Heresy was debated and rejected and the major outcome of the Council was a new form of the creed that we know as the Nicene Creed that makes it very clear that Jesus is very much one and the same as God...

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty
Maker of Heaven and earth
And of all things visible and invisible
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten son of God

Nicea was just the start of a long series of councils all trying to deal with scholars and academics seeking to question the fundamental doctrine of the Trinity. The interesting thing about all of this is that in Christianity, these difficult issues of belief were thrashed out and reconciled by discussion in council by bishops who called on the Holy Spirit to aid and guide them to the right answers.

These discussions were often rowdy affairs and during council, bishops were regularly attacked and injured, one even killed, by their more hot headed opponents – The Archbishop of Canterbury doesn't know he's born chairing General Synod! But it was discussion that determined the outcome and it was then the Emperors and not the Bishops who imposed the results.

From the beginning, Christianity emerged as a conciliar religion in which doctrines weren't taken as ready made by God but discovered through discussion, criticism and reform and this marks the most substantial difference between Christianity and Islam. In Sunni Islam, it is clearly understood that the will of God has been pronounced for all time and so there cannot be any room for discussion or change to those laws through human council. The Koran was revealed word for word to Mohammed directly by God so it is not for man to alter God's will.

The real difference between Christianity and Islam is not so much the theology (although that is significant), it's the difference in the form of membership of the religion. Membership for a Christian means membership of a church. Membership for a Muslim means submission to the will of Allah as revealed in the Koran. We Christians have our sacred text too but that is open to interpretation.

Christians believe that the mission of Jesus was not to burden the Jewish people with new additions to their already fussy system of rules and regulations. On the contrary, his mission was to call people to discipleship by creating an assembly; a church; where people would gather together in His name knowing that He would be there with them.

St Paul gave substance to this assembly which grew under his guidance to be something distinct from its members, one with its own rules and laws and with offices that would ensure the succession of the Apostles through the generations that were to come.

So when we listen to Paul's letters to this early church, we can see his hand guiding the infant church to grow and develop. This first letter to the church in Corinth was written only 22 years after Christ's death. The Corinthian assembly was still finding its feet having been established 4

years earlier by Paul and it had more questions than answers. In fact the primary purpose of Paul's letter to them was to answer a long list of questions that they'd sent him on which they couldn't agree.

But before he gets to that part, he needs to tackle this issue of growing divisions that had been brought to his attention. He'd heard from various sources reports of jealousy, divisiveness, sexual immorality and a failure to discipline church members and he starts by addressing this issue. He starts off...

"I appeal to you, Brothers and Sisters, in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought." He goes on to say, "One of you says 'I follow Paul' another, 'I follow Apollos', another, 'I follow Cephas', still another, 'I follow Christ'.

As the letter develops, he keeps coming back to the central message of our faith, the message of love. His message for that young church in Corinth is just as valid for us here in Bunbury today. It is almost like a blueprint for our church.

He tells the Corinthians that we must never let our loyalty to human leaders divide Christians into camps. We have to care for our fellow believers and not fight with them and through it all we can only have one allegiance and that is an allegiance to Christ. He teaches us about immorality and how we must never compromise on sin. We must not allow the sinful world around us to be our influence but rather live up to God's standards of morality.

On freedom, he tells us that whilst we are all free in Christ, we must not abuse that freedom by being inconsiderate and insensitive to others, love must guide our behaviour. On worship, he tells us that our worship needs to be harmonious and worthy of God's high honour. And finally on resurrection and eternal life, he reminds us that our lives are not in vain because, at the last, we will be raised up and spend eternity with Christ.

We would do well to remind ourselves of Paul's blueprint for our church time and again. We are only human, and God expects us to behave like human's to have our differences and disagreements but at all times to remember the two great commandments of love; that we love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind and with all our strength and that we love our neighbour as ourselves. If we do that then our differences can always be resolved.

Let's pray for some of that love in Geneva right now.

Amen

Tom Crotty