

The testimony of Christ

The suggested Lectionary theme for today is “The testimony of Christ”. It's drawn from the passage that was read from 1 Corinthians :

“I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind – just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In some ways it's an interesting start to this letter to the Corinthians. It's a very positive and congratulatory introduction to what's to follow.

Paul acknowledges his thanks to God for the church in Corinth;

he recognizes that they've received grace from God;

he flatters them that they've been enriched by God “in speech, and knowledge of every kind”;

he intimates that this “enrichment by God” is somehow related to the strengthening of the testimony of Christ among them;

and he finally underlines that they're not lacking in any spiritual gift.

It's a very glowing tribute to the church in this Greek city, and, if the letter stopped here, it would leave you with the impression that this group is a shining example of the best the church of Christ has to offer.

The letter doesn't stop here, of course, and we quickly realize that this church that has been “... enriched in [Christ Jesus], in speech and knowledge of every kind ...”;

this church that is “... not lacking in any spiritual gift ...”;

this church is in a bit of a mess.

They're split into different factions loyal to various leaders;

they're warping the communal bond that should be present in their communion feasts;

they seem to be condoning various kinds of sexual immorality;

and they're arrogant in their faith, vying for place of prominence with regard to their respective spiritual gifts.

It's not a particularly pretty picture, and Paul goes on at some lengths in his letter to try to set them straight on a number of fronts.

Paul, like all of us, though, is a creature of his time and there are aspects of his instructions to the Corinthians that we have been able to contextualize and temper over the centuries, but the main point I want to address this morning is this apparent disconnect between a church that is “being strengthened in its testimony of Christ” and a church that is so obviously flawed in so many ways.

On one level I suppose it should be a no-brainer that no group of humans will be “perfect”, regardless of how you want to define perfection. Back in the days when I was repairing typewriters for a living, I used to joke that fixing a typewriter is easy compared to fixing people. A typewriter has a single, defined, way of operating properly.

It's a machine.

It *has* to work a certain way, and if it isn't doing what it's supposed to do, a good technician knows exactly what part to replace or adjust to bring it back to its rightful state.

People are more complicated than that. For one thing, there are far more variables at work in determining how they will behave in a given situation. For another thing, they are not machines responding mechanically to outside intervention – the fingers on the keyboard – they are independent agents, and have a large degree of control over how they will behave, even if they are subject to subtle nudges from God.

So I suppose it shouldn't be surprising that the church in Corinth has its issues. I'm sure all of the churches of the early days of Christianity had their own issues, just as we all have our own issues today.

I guess I'm struggling with this “disconnect” between what I think the Church *should* be and what the Church actually *is*, because on some level I still struggle when I see churches or individual Christians acting in ways that are in contradiction to what *I* believe is faithful discipleship.

In other words, I tend to scratch my head when I see churches acting in ways, or promoting behaviour, that is in contradiction to what I believe is conveyed by “the testimony of Christ”.

It's not that I think I have a perfect handle on what constitutes faithfulness, but I do have my own understanding of things, and I need to be true to that understanding. I hope I'm not being arrogant in my *own* faith when I hold fast to how I read Scripture.

I get it that others will have a legitimately different reading of Scripture, and therefore a different understanding of how to live their lives.

I get it that we all have our own personal history that colours how we make our way through life. We all have our own hurts and disappointments, and our own joys and moments of inspiration.

I get it that *your* eyes are not *my* eyes, and that you see things differently from me.

I get it that *your* ears are not *my* ears, and that you hear things differently from me.

I know I'm not perfect.

Just ask Mary-Lou ... on second thought ... please don't ask Mary-Lou ...

I can't help but wonder why, after 2,000 years, we haven't yet sorted it all out and become the shining beacon of hope that draws all people to the feet of Christ.

A couple of years ago I came across a quote about the Bible from an Indigenous elder in the eighteenth or nineteenth century that went something along the lines of :

“this is a very good book – it's surprising you Christians aren't better than you are, given how long you've had it ...”

As I've said elsewhere, I think part of the answer to this “disconnect” is that it almost doesn't matter what this Book, or any other book of sacred scripture, says. Even people of faith who lean more towards a fundamentalist / literalist reading of scripture tend to be selective in where they place their emphasis.

What matters is what we choose to take from it;

what we choose to highlight and promote;

what we choose to ignore, or downplay;

and to what extent we take to heart the fundamental commandments of this Book to love God with everything we have and to love others as much as we love ourselves.

And, finally, I think part of the answer to this “disconnect” is to what extent we allow ourselves to listen to our own hearts, to our own sense of what is right and wrong in the context of those two fundamental commandments.

In other words, I think if we are truly, honestly, trying to love God with everything we have, and if we are truly, honestly, trying to love others as much as we love ourselves, I think we need to trust that God is capable of providing us with the insight needed to judge what is right and wrong as we interact with each other. We have been told, after all, that the Holy Spirit of God is with us.

I guess you'd call that a conscience. An awareness of how your actions are affecting the world around you, and a gentle nudging towards the right path.

It may also be an openness to listening to others to better understand where the moral dilemmas lie, and to accept wise counsel as we struggle to adopt the right attitude and sense of right and wrong.

So I know that I have my own filters when it comes to this Book, and when it comes to this letter to the Corinthians.

I choose to highlight and promote certain passages, and I choose to ignore or downplay certain passages.

In this letter to the Corinthians, Paul covers a lot of ground.

I'm quite happy to embrace and see as testimony to Christ Paul's statement that “... we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.” I'm happy to promote that image as one that encourages us to join forces as we engage in God's work.

Or Paul's statement that “... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” I'm happy to acknowledge that we each have a place and a role to play in seeking after the common good, and that the common good is in God's sights.

Or “... If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.” I'm happy to bring some sense of balance to our very human tendency to want to stand out from the crowd.

I'm less comfortable embracing and seeing as testimony to Christ Paul's call to “... hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in

the day of the Lord.” I'm not even certain I understand exactly what this means, but there is a sense of violence inherent in it that causes me to recoil.

I'm more likely to lean towards a sense that Paul is reflecting his own cultural bias than God's instruction when he says “... Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head ...”

Or towards the end of the letter when he says “... As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.” Most churches have felt comfortable contextualizing that instruction and placing it among cultural norms that are not binding on the church universal.

Anyone care to challenge me on that one ... ??

But, I know of churches where passages like this would be taken as directives – instructions for the church on how to behave at all times and in all places.

So it's not surprising that there is discord in the Body of Christ – we don't all agree on what giving testimony to Christ means.

We don't all agree on what is central, or on what is fundamental, to our faith.

We can't even agree on who deserves to carry the name “Christian”.

And yet, we all look to this Book for guidance.

And I think we look to *this* Book because we all agree that *it* gives testimony to Christ, even if we can't agree on how to read it, or on what parts to take literally and what parts to take metaphorically, and on what parts we can allow to simply inspire us to be better than we usually are.

As I've said at other times, I've been surprised at how much I've enjoyed grappling with this Book over the last few years.

The grappling hasn't generally been easy – grappling rarely is – but it's been invigorating and inspiring for me, because I *do* believe that it carries a message that we need to hear;

a message that can change our lives;

a message that gives testimony to all that Jesus held dear.

So I encourage you to take the time to study this book.

To grapple with it.

To try to make sense of the many voices it contains;

the many perspectives it offers.

One of the challenges, I think, though, is to sift through the various voices contained in it to hear those that speak the language of our own heart ... if that heart is truly, honestly, seeking to love God with everything you have and to truly, honestly, love your neighbour as yourself.