

### Epiphany 3, Year A

Isaiah 9:1-4

Psalm 27

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 1: 10-18

Gospel: Matthew 4: 12-23

Those of you who know Dennis Walshe might like to hear that after a tough three weeks and two operations, he's doing much better. He now has an ileostomy, hopefully temporary, that he's christened 'bubbling Bertha,' and that he is not yet the possessor of a semi-colon. Just as I was leaving Dennis' bedside on Friday, the catholic priest on duty waved at me—he'd heard my voice as he was waiting to see Dennis—and stopped for a chat. Try as one might, one just can't avoid chaplains in hospital. It was Fr Eddie Lalor, who was with us at the Carol Service. He reminded me that it was Christian Unity week.

It's not top of my priorities, and it falls at a silly time of year, too soon after Christmas. Last year, the Kiltegan Fathers invited me to give their Annual Christian Unity [lecture](#), but they have it in February – a better time. This year, the PP and I decided that rather than have a badly attended midweek service in gloomy January, we'd do something practical at Christmas. And that's why I preached at one of the masses on 21 December, and why Fr Eddie came to the Carol Service the next day.

If *unity* means united in mutual support as we try to live the life of Christ as best we can in the culture and place in which we find ourselves, then I'm all for it. If it means uniformity—that we should all be the same—then I'm against it. Having different ways of thinking and different ways of doing things is wonderful. It means that life is not boring. It means that we can have intelligent discussions about things, whether they be theories of the atonement, or ethical dilemmas, or animal experimentation, or whatever.

What we need is *Christian unity-of-purpose*. Mutual respect. We don't quite have it in this state, but it's immeasurably better than it was. Yes, it's sad that when I go to RC Mass dressed as a Church of Ireland priest, I'm not offered the sacrament, not because I'd refuse it (I wouldn't) or because left to his own devices the priest wouldn't offer it (he might), but because conservative people might object because it's against church rules. And the other way round: I wouldn't surprise an RC priest by offering him the sacrament in this church—not because the priest wouldn't accept it (he might), but because of what some of his flock might say if he did. It's possible, of course, that some C of I parishioners might take offence at what I might do in these circumstances, but I'm not inclined to take any notice of that. I, too, am bound by church rules, and I yield to no-one in my regard for them.

It's all rather silly anyway. RC chaplains in prisons and hospitals offer the sacrament to *everyone*—no questions asked. I urge C of I patients to accept it with joy. In other countries, there are fewer scruples than there are here where waters are muddied by centuries of resentment bred into the respective tribes. In the history of Christianity, murder and violence have too often resulted from a lack of mutual respect because of this sort of tribalism—which brings me to today's Epistle.

Paul was cross with people arguing about whose baptism was best. Next week I'm baptizing twins in this service. It will be fun. I will be doing things that I don't usually do. I will be doing things that maybe you aren't used to. But I challenge anyone to say that my baptism is somehow less efficacious than anyone else's because of that. Something like that seems to be what the Corinthians are arguing about. 'If this gets any worse' maybe Paul is thinking, 'there'll be arguments, rivalries, sectarianism and even warfare'.

Isn't that the problem with the world—'my way is right, yours is wrong'. 'I know best.' 'If you don't agree with me, you don't deserve to live.' You're not part of my tribe, so you matter less than I do and I can have you 'rubbed out'. We need tribes and families for support. But when they get 'notions' of superiority, those in other tribes come to be regarded as less human than us, with ethnic cleansing and concentration camps but a small step away.

The problem with tribalism, or *denominational posturing* in church terms, arises when how we do things becomes emphasized at the expense of the reason why we do them. The point of the game is, as I said before, to live as best we can the life of Christ in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. The focus is the Lord and the Lord's kingdom. If we forget that focus, we're likely to think that the focus is what we think and do, rather than what the Lord teaches. The focus becomes 'me' and 'us'. The focus becomes 'our' mob versus 'your' mob.

Life is too short for this kind of nonsense. Of course decisions have to be made, but as I said last week, it's often not a matter of right and wrong, but rather simply choices and consequences. It really doesn't matter if others choose to express their love of the Lord differently from us, so long as we, and they, don't start to claim that only 'our' way is best. If we do, we are making an idol of the way we do

things. Tribalism in any form depends on the claim that 'we are best', ignoring the possibility that other tribes may think that 'they' are best. It assumes that there is nothing bigger than us.

If religion has no other use, at least it tells us that there *is* something bigger than us. We humans can be extraordinarily arrogant. We assume that we rule the planet and that it's our plaything. Let me tell you, boys and girls, that if any creatures could be said to rule the planet, they could well be jellyfish and their friends in the oceans. They've been around 700 million years. They're the oldest living multicellular organisms. They can kill us. They are increasing in number. They show every sign of continuing well into the future, long after we humans have gone (we're not, despite what we think, a very successful species).

In *Christian Unity Week* we do well to remember how tribes and tribalism can easily lead us to do terrible things. We do well to realize that what dictates our identity as creatures of this earth doesn't come from us, but from the Christ. And that identity could include Jews and Buddhists and others, as well as us people who call ourselves Christians.

This is what Christian Unity is about: respect leading to justice. Disunity and tribalism that lead to injustice are what Paul was arguing against.

Ultimately, what matters is what the Psalm speaks of: 'The Lord is my light and my salvation ... One thing have I desired of the Lord, which I will require: even that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the fair beauty of the Lord, and to visit his temple.'