

Third Sunday after Epiphany

Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; Matthew 4:12-23; I Corinthians 1:10-18

Isaiah 9:1-4 are the opening lines to one of Isaiah's most important prophecies – a prophecy of a coming king, chosen by God who would liberate Israel from the domination of the government that threatened their existence as God's people. The prophecy was written at a time when both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah were threatened by Tiglath-Pileser, the emperor of Assyria. Isaiah writes to proclaim that God will act to set Judah free from the intimidation of Tiglath-Pileser, and will do so through a king who is about to come.

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined” (9:2). That light is the birth of a king. “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us” (9:6a), and it will be that child who will bring to Israel the active possibility of living out the Jubilee in a nation that is equitable, just, free of poverty and in a dynamic loving relationship with God.

God, the prophet Isaiah predicts, will be the liberator of God's people through this king. The nation will grow under that king's care; they will live in shalom and in joy, experiencing plenty, justice, relationship with God and the elimination of poverty (vs. 3). And they will have not only internal justice, but will be freed from further invasion, conquest or domination by other nations (vs 4).

One might contend that the king whom Isaiah had in mind when he penned these words, was Hezekiah (715-687 BCE), who proved to be one of Judah's most astute and effective kings, as well as one who trusted implicitly in Yahweh. But the prophecy suggests that this king is far more than what Hezekiah might or could become. This king is unlike any king Israel has ever had – even David. For this king will build Israel into becoming, in its life together and for each individual, the shalom community – society as God intended it to be.

The description of the area over which this king will reign is particularly significant, and is a clear indicator that the prophecy goes beyond Hezekiah. The geographical area over which he will reign will include “the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations”. In fact, it will be out of Zebulun and Naphtali that he will come, bringing the remaining area so described under his influence and setting it free.

What is meant by “the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali”? When Israel conquered Palestine under Joshua, the territory that had been taken was divided between the tribes of Israel, so that each tribe had specific territory assigned to it. The areas assigned to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali was at the northern edge of the land conquered by Joshua. By the time of Isaiah 500 years later, the terms Zebulun and Naphtali had come to mean the northernmost frontier of the northern kingdom of Israel, the national region farthest from the capital city and the hardest to defend. In fact, by the time this prophecy was written, Zebulun and Naphtali were no longer part of Israel but had been annexed to the Assyrian Empire by Tiglath-Pileser.

What Isaiah is declaring, therefore, is that this coming great king of Israel will begin his work of liberation and will come out of Zebulun and Naphtali to eventually win all of Israel to himself

(the combined northern and southern kingdoms). That which will become the promised land of this coming king will include not only Zebulun and Naphtali, but also “the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan and Galilee of the nations”.

The territory that made up “the way of the sea” was the coastal region south of Mount Carmel, which was under the dominance of Syria (not Assyria) and the Phoenicians. “The land beyond the Jordan” was the region east of the Jordan River, that was then under the influence of Edom and Moab. “Galilee of the nations” (or “Galilee of the Gentiles”) was the area east of the Sea of Galilee, which was dominated by Ammon and Bashan. In other words, what Isaiah was doing was taking a conceptual “walk” around the perimeter of the kingdom that was to be, the kingdom ruled by this magnificent king who would be “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (vs. 6b). That coming kingdom would include not only Isaiah’s present territories of Israel and Judah, but all the land around its perimeter, as well. Of course, Hezekiah never controlled, or even contemplated controlling, such a vast territory. But this coming king would, and he would come out of the north – out of Zebulun and Naphtali to claim his throne!

Psalm 27:1, 4-9 is a part of a hymn of trust in God – a testimony to this psalmist’s confidence that Yahweh will protect him in this life and will enable him to gaze upon God’s presence in eternal life. As such, it is a clear indication that the Hebrew people believed in eternal life much earlier than biblical scholars of a generation ago asserted.

The psalm is divided into three parts. Verses 1-6 open the psalm with a clear (and beautiful) statement of the psalmist’s and the worshipper’s confidence and certainty in God and in God’s protective intervention in his life. Verses 7-12 presents petitions that the worshipper presents to God the King in the light of that confidence. And then the psalm concludes with verses 13-14 which gives final testimony to the psalmist’s trust in God and in the encouragement of other Yahweh worshippers to do the same.

Verses 1-6 open the psalm. “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh – my adversaries and foes – they shall stumble and fall. Though an army encamps against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident. One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple. For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock. Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord” (vss. 1-6).

“Yahweh is my salvation. Whom would I possibly fear? Yahweh is my stronghold. Of whom would I be afraid?” The opening lines, in the usual parallel construction of Hebrew poetry, beautifully state the entire premise of this Psalm. That parallelism captures the breadth of the dynamic and power of this psalm.

First, “Yahweh is my salvation. Whom shall I fear?” God delivers the psalmist from all those who would seek to hurt or destroy him, whether they are political, economic or religious leaders

from within Israel, private citizens who would seek to do him harm, or powerful political, religious or business leaders from outside the country. The question, “Whom shall I fear?” is particularly powerful. The Hebrew has the sense about it of “With God protecting me, who of consequence could possibly do anything to me that would be worthy of even the slightest attention?” It is as if the psalmist is saying, “It defies the imagination to even conceive of anyone acting in such a way toward me that I should feel even the slightest smidgen of fear”! It is akin to St. Paul’s magnificent statement, “If God is for us, who could possibly be against us” (Rom. 8:31).

Second, the parallel construction now has the psalmist declare, “Yahweh is my stronghold. Of whom would I be afraid?” Here the psalmist changes the metaphor. Whereas in the first phrase, God is looked upon as the great deliverer – the general, mighty in battle – in the second phrase, God is looked upon as a great defense against attack. He is not only the high walls of the city, nor even the thick ramparts of the palace-castle. He is the very keep of the castle, where no one can get through the multiple doors – or even if they get through the first door, will be trapped by the second or even the third and thus will be slaughtered by the soldiers high on the parapets. Again, in the light of such godly protection, “of whom would I possibly be afraid?”

The psalmist then continues in verses two through six to flesh out this assertion of the deliverance and protection of God. He does this in a series of images. If his foes seek to destroy him (the phrase, “devour my flesh” is not a literal reference to cannibalism but was a popular metaphor throughout the Near East for destroying someone), “they shall stumble and fall”. If an army besieges the psalmist, their siege will come to naught. If people rise up in protest or attack on his person, “yet will I be confident” (vs. 2-3). God will “shelter” him, “conceal” him but will also “set me high on a rock” (vs. 5). To “set high on a rock” is a reference to a defensive position in battle that allows for an overwhelming offense. To be “high on a rock” is to have your military forces physically high above the enemy (either on a rock outcropping or on a high wall, so that the enemy is forced to attack your position by running uphill, both making their advance slow and making them vulnerable to an offensive hurtling down upon them). Thus, God will protect him against all the machinations of his enemies, whether those enemies are pagan nations or fellow Israelites. God will allow him to mount a strong defense.

This psalmist asks only “one thing of the Lord”. That is to seek after Yahweh, to “live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple” (vs. 4). The words, “the house of the Lord” are not simply a reference to Solomon’s Temple. The context of this psalm makes it clear that this is a reference to the heavenly habitation of God (cf. vss. 5, 8, 9, 13), a vision of the next life. The result of God’s protection of the psalmist and other believers in Yahweh and gifting them to attack God’s enemies is that “my head is lifted up and I will offer in Yahweh’s tent sacrifices with joy” (vs. 6).

This moves us to the second portion of the psalm (vss. 7-12) that deal with petitions to God. The psalmist has made a strong assertion about God in the first six verses of this psalm – that God will protect, deliver and defend God’s people, so that they can be confident in Him. The psalmist and worshippers trust and hope that this assertion is, indeed, true. To be sure that such certainty is not ill-advised, these worshippers make petition of God. Will God hear their cry for help (vs. 7)? Will God reveal his face to them (vs. 8)? Will God not forsake them when their

obedience of him gets them in trouble with the “powers that be” (vs. 9)? If even one’s mother and father forsake him, will God still be present to him (vs. 10)? Will God “teach me your ways” (vs. 11) and protect one from “my adversaries” (vs. 12)? One senses the trust and surety of the author. But also one senses the anxiety and hesitancy of the psalmist, because he has really “gone out on a limb” for God and God’s kingdom!

But the moment of trepidation passes, so that the Psalmist can end as well as he began. Third. “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord” (vss. 13-14).

This third statement is the clearest statement in the psalm of the psalmist’s belief in eternal life. The traditional translation of verse 13 is indeed beautiful. But the Hebrew can be better translated, “I trust to behold the beauty of Yahweh in the land of life eternal”. The term, “the beauty of Yahweh” is used throughout the Old Testament to describe eternal happiness in the presence of God, not that God is breathtakingly beautiful (e.g., see Exod. 33:19, Hos. 10:11; Zech. 9:17, Psalm 17:15). And that presence will be in *hayyim*, “life eternal” (e.g., Psalm 21:5, 36:10; Dan. 12:2; intriguingly, the same use of the word appears in the Ugaritic Text, circa 1300-1200 BCE [II Aqht. 6:27-29], demonstrating that the concept of eternal life existed in ancient thought, well before the writing of Psalm 27).

What the psalmist has done in this psalm, therefore, is quite remarkable. He has linked together God’s continuing watch-care of God’s people, those people’s consistent living out of the covenant between themselves and God and the reward to consistent ethical and social behavior of “beholding the beauty of Yahweh in the land of life eternal”. The psalmist is declaring that God has called God’s people to the work of building the world as God intended it to be (a shalom society of political justice, economic equity and a relational culture). To do so will inevitably mean opposition from those who want a society of oppressive power, the exploiting of the poor in order to build personal wealth, and a culture of command and control. Such people and their political, economic and religious institutions, both within Israel and outside it, will do everything possible to stop the building of a shalom society. As a result, they will attempt to defame, persecute and destroy the work of God’s people. But God will strengthen God’s people for this long struggle in two ways. First, God will protect, deliver and defend his people in this life. Second, God will promise those who are seeking to realize God’s intentions for the world a “land of life eternal” so that those who have lived their lives working for God’s kingdom of shalom will one day experience that kingdom and will experience it for all time and eternity! What a dream and what an assurance to give God’s persecuted legions!

Matthew 4:12-23 presents Matthew’s creative use of Isaiah 9:1-4 to present Jesus as the Messianic king about whom the prophet Isaiah wrote. He quotes our Old Testament lesson for this Sunday, but does so in an intriguing context. Matthew states, “Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled” (vss. 12-14). He then quotes Isaiah 9:1-2.

The primary theme of the Gospel of Matthew is that Jesus is the Messiah, but he is the marginalized Messiah – the one who comes from the margins of life in order to transform the center. Here, Matthew literally presents this theme. Jesus begins his ministry in Zebulun and Naphtali, the farthest corners of Jewish Palestine. It is, to quote Matthew’s account of Isaiah, “on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles”.

Matthew 4:12-17 tells us that after John was arrested in Judea, Jesus went north into “the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali” to begin his ministry, far from the reach of the Jewish leaders. Zebulun and Naphtali are in “Galilee of the Gentiles” – the extreme north and northeastern margins of Israel. Thus, Matthew tells us, Jesus began his ministry in the far corners of Galilee with the proclamation, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (4:17). The gospel is first acted out and proclaimed at the literal margins of Israel’s life, and will come from those regions to turn the center upside down!

Zebulun and Naphtali, in which the inconsequential villages of Nazareth (Jesus’ hometown) and Capernaum (Jesus’ headquarters) dwelt, were the two farthest territories of Israel given to these two Hebrew tribes by Joshua (Josh. 19:10-16, 32-39). By quoting Isaiah 9:1-2, Matthew is reminding the reader that these were the first two territories conquered by Tiglath-Pileser and annexed to the Assyrian Empire (Isa. 9 was written about that event). They were the first to fall under the domination and oppression of Gentile systems. Now (at the time of Jesus) they are under the domination and oppression of Rome, even a crueller tyrant than was Assyria. But it is in Zebulun and Naphtali that Jesus will begin his ministry, Matthew tells us. Consequently, it will be Zebulun and Naphtali, the first captured by the “powers-that-be” that will be released from those same powers and will be set free by the gospel that Jesus is coming to proclaim and to act out.

Further, Matthew is careful to quote that part of Isaiah 9 that specifically describes the extent of his predicted Messiah’s reign: “on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles”. In our exposition of the Old Testament lesson for today, I pointed out that these locations refer, respectively, to the western region of Palestine ruled by Syria and Phoenicia, the region east of the Jordan River ruled by Edom and Moab and the northeastern region east of the Sea of Galilee ruled by Ammon and Bashan (all of which would be conquered by Assyria and absorbed into the Assyrian Empire in the same campaign as conquered the northern kingdom of Israel). Together with Matthew’s reference to Zebulun and Naphtali, the apostle has been careful to circle the entirety of Roman-controlled Israel.¹ He is stressing that Jesus came from the margins of Israel as the Marginalized Messiah. Those margins are geographic (that is, his ministry starts in Zebulun and Naphtali), in origin (he lived in the minor village of Nazareth and worked out of inconsequential Capernaum) and in social position (he was the son of peasants who were skilled laborers – i.e., carpenters). Matthew furthers this point by expressly stating in chapters 14 through 18 that Jesus conducts his ministry in the areas designated by Isaiah as “on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles”. Thus, Matthew asserts the messianic nature of Jesus as the fulfillment of this prophesy made eight centuries earlier.

The work that Jesus has come to do is stated by Matthew in this way. “From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”” (vs. 17). Although this

¹ Except for the south which was desert and was occupied by no nation.

is the traditional way of translating the Greek, a better translation would be “Turn your lives around, because here comes the kingdom of the heavens” (cf., F. Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: Matthew 1-12*, pp. 138-141). This statement of the intent of Jesus’ ministry is pregnant with meaning.

First, “turn your lives around”. The Greek is actually “*metanoieite*”. The word literally means “to turn around” or “to reverse direction”. The Greek word has no religious sense to it at all; it simply means to reverse directions. To translate this word with the English “repent” is to place religious meaning upon it, which is not what Jesus was saying at all. What he was simply saying was “turn around”, “change your directions”, “change your preoccupations” or “stop following the Roman-Jewish authorities’ way and start following the Jesus way”.

Second, “because here comes” captures the immediacy of the Greek that doesn’t as clearly express itself through “has come near”. It is as if Matthew borrowed the term that newscasters now use when they excitedly announce “late-breaking news”. In other words, when they use this term, news reporters mean that they are informing the listener about something that is going on the very instant they are reporting it. It isn’t something that has recently happened, but is now complete. Rather, it is happening this very instant – and we have no idea at this moment how it will all turn out! That is what Matthew means by using the Greek word “*engiken*”. It is in the very preaching and actions of Jesus, going on right now, that Jesus announces that the kingdom of the heavens is upon us. It is happening right now – and no one (not even Jesus – Mt. 24:36) will know how it is all going to turn out!

Third, “here comes the kingdom of the heavens”. As is well known, Matthew uses the term “kingdom of heaven” wherever the other gospels use the term “kingdom of God”. It is assumed that the actual words spoken by Jesus were “the kingdom of God”. However, since the Gospel of Matthew was written for a Jewish audience, and since it was considered unacceptable for a Jew to ever speak the name of God, the word “heaven” was used as a circumlocution for God. That is the case in this summary statement of Jesus’ message, with Matthew substituting the word “heaven” for the name “God”. But there is more to it than that.

The actual Greek word used by Matthew that is translated “heaven” is a plural rather than a singular noun. That is, it ought to be translated “heavens” rather than “heaven”. Why would Matthew use the plural? After all, if Jesus had actually said “the kingdom of God”, he couldn’t have used the plural, “the gods” because that would fly in the face of Jewish monotheism. Why, then, does Matthew use the phrase “the kingdom of the heavens” rather than “the kingdom of heaven”?

The word “heavens” nuances the locus and authority of God’s work of intervention into the earthly order in a way that the word “heaven” could not. “The heavens” is a place, a location, a provenance from which Jesus’ authority comes. It is the location of God’s personal residence. It is from that location that the action has been initiated and is currently occurring on earth and in Israel which Jesus is carrying out. Just as Jesus has come, as the marginalized Messiah, from Israel’s margins of Zebulun and Naphtali, so he brings with him a message of God’s intervention in human history to seek its transformation – an intervention coming from the margins of the universe – the heavens themselves!

But the term Jesus uses is “the kingdom of the heavens”. It is a kingdom that Jesus proclaims and not an ecclesiastical or spiritual entity (a temple, a synagogue or the church). Jesus intentionally uses a political term to describe the nature of God’s intervention in the human order through Jesus the Marginalized Messiah. The word “kingdom” simply means “a politically organized community or major territorial unit having a monarchial form of government headed by a king or queen”.² It does not mean simply the reign of God or sovereignty of God; to interpret it as such is to not take seriously the political implications of the word.

“Kingdom”, by the very nature of the word, has four essential elements encapsulated in the word. In order for a kingdom to be a kingdom, and not some other unit of governance (e.g., a nation, a state, a city, a territory), it must include in it a *throne*, a *king*, a *dominion*, and *powers* (e.g., Col. 1:15-16). All four components are needed for a kingdom to authentically be a kingdom. Let’s look briefly at these four components.

The *throne* is the symbolic institution of power in a state, city, economic or religious institution. In its most literal sense, a throne is a literal “seat” (we refer to the “seat of government”) on which the king sits. A *king* is the specific person who currently occupies that kingdom’s throne. The ruler can change; the throne cannot (except through revolution). Thus, when a monarch of Great Britain dies, the people cry, “The king (i.e., that specific prince) is dead; long live the king (i.e., the throne or institution of monarchy)”.

A *dominion* is the sphere of influence or territory ruled by the king. Thus the dominion of the Roman Empire was the geographical territory of the empire. Finally, the *powers* are the sanctions or rules that legitimize the current occupant of the throne, and allow him to exercise his authority as the king over that dominion. Thus, the “powers” grant to that person the privileges, obligations and limitations accorded those occupying the throne.

The word “kingdom” is not an empty word, but is rather heavy with meaning. Thus, for Jesus to use the term “the kingdom of the heavens”, Jesus means a dominion (the entire world, and even the universe) ruled by God (the king) who orders its institution of power (the heavens and the earth), exercising the powers (grace and the Law manifesting itself in political justice, economic equity, elimination of poverty and a relational culture between God and all humanity) necessary to carry out God’s agenda, which is to shape the earth into the kingdom of God’s shalom.

By the very use of the term, “the kingdom of the heavens (or God)”, Jesus means to contrast God’s work to the kingdoms of Rome, the Jewish monarchy, the rulers of the synagogues and of the Temple and to the economic powers of Israel. Jesus, coming from the margins of Israel’s political, economic and religious society, has been called and chosen by God to turn Israel’s world (and all systems of the world) upside-down by ushering in God’s kingdom of justice, equity and unity with God. Here is the “late-breaking news” of how God is at work right now in the world through the coming of Jesus the Christ. So “turn your lives around”, rapidly shift your priorities and join Jesus in what he is doing to turn this world “right side up”!

² Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary, “Kingdom” (Springfield, MA.: Merriam-Webster, Inc. Publishers).

Matthew then concludes this startling opening of the ministry of Jesus by telling the story of four men who heard the “late-breaking news”, “turned their lives around” and shifted their priorities so that they might join Jesus in his work to announce and bring into being the coming of “the kingdom of the heavens”.

“As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people”. Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James, son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him” (4:18-22).

What does it mean to take seriously the command of the marginalized Jesus, “Turn your lives around, because here comes the kingdom of the heavens”? What this text tells us is that to embrace Jesus’ kingdom of God is to completely upset the social, economic and political priorities and obligations of one’s life and even one’s family, business and place in society. Peter, Andrew, James and John were all fishermen working in small family businesses both to support themselves and to meet the fishing quotas placed upon them by the Roman government to contribute to the economic base of the Roman Empire. For them to choose to arbitrarily leave their fishing businesses had two severe implications to it. First, they were no longer fulfilling their obligations to their families. They were depriving their extended families of a steady income that would keep those families from falling into economic disaster and thus become one of the much-feared “expendables” (like beggars, widows and orphans, and the unclean). Likewise, they were forcing a patriarch like Zebedee into a highly risky state as he would lose his workforce and the economic security upon which his retirement would be built. So, leaving their nets was for them to act irresponsibly toward their families. But, second, they were placing themselves in great risk with the Roman government by abandoning their nets, for they were no longer meeting the fishing quotas placed upon them by the government (comparable to not paying their taxes), thus making themselves enemies of Rome and of the Jewish priesthood. This was, therefore, no light task that Jesus was bidding them to assume.

But God’s kingdom was calling them to “turn their lives around”, and to give those lives to the embrace of “the kingdom of the heavens”. This radical embrace would mean a radical response. It would mean a new focus for their lives – the focus of following Jesus rather than following the priorities set by the political, economic and spiritual forces of their society. It would mean a new family – primary loyalty to Jesus and the company of those who were committed to the kingdom of God, rather than to their family or any other human obligation (“Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? Those who do the will of my Father in heaven” – 12:48-49). Finally, it would mean a new mission – “fishing for people” rather than “fishing for fish”, concentrating on building God’s kingdom and the constituency of that kingdom rather than building one’s own economic wealth or political or social or even religious power! Thus, in this story, Matthew clearly and even painfully illustrates the radical implications of truly turning your lives around because “here comes the kingdom of the heavens”!

I Corinthians 1:10-18 describes the significant divisions that faced the Christian church in the city of Corinth. The divisions that Paul commented upon in his two letters to the Corinthian Church were so wide that they were ripping apart the very body of that church. The church in Corinth faced divisions over people and beliefs (I Cor. 1:10-17), problems of immorality (I Cor 6:18-7:1), extramarital affairs, divorces and breakdowns in marriages (7:2-16), lack of accountability (3:10-17; 5:1-2; II Cor. 1:12-2:4), absence of church discipline (5:3-13; II Cor. 2:5-11), lawsuits against each other (6:1-11), insensitivity and lack of caring toward each other (8:1-13), dealing destructively with outside groups (10:1-14), being seduced by the standards of the secular culture outside the church (10:27-30; II Cor. 6:11-7:1), arguments over alternate styles of worship (11:2-34), dissent over the exercising of people's gifts (14:1-40), dissent over providing assistance to the poor (16:1-9), dissent over whether and how the church should be involved in social concerns (II Cr. 8:1-9:15), and dissent over financial priorities (II Cor. 9:6-15).

Today's epistle lesson presents the primary reason for the church being divided over so many issues. They were divided over issues and people because they were split into four warring factions that were seeking to dominate and, if possible, eliminate each other. Paul writes in today's epistle lesson, "It has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul", or "I belong to Apollos", or "I belong to Cephas", or "I belong to Christ" (1:11-12). A further reading of the two epistles that looks for further definition of these parties reveals the following:

"I belong to Paul". The "Pauline" party consisted of those whose allegiance was to Paul. They were most likely the original converts with whom Paul founded the Corinthian Church in his one-and-a-half year ministry there. They would primary have been slaves, freedmen and peasants.

"I belong to Apollos". The "Apollos" party formed around Paul's successor as pastor of the Corinthian Church. Apollos was a highly articulate Alexandrian Jew, highly influenced by Philo of Alexandria and, consequently, the philosophy of Stoicism. Paul implies that Apollos was eloquent, philosophical and intellectual in his presentation of the gospel (I Cor. 2:1ff; II Cor. 11:6; II Cor. 11:5, 12:11). In Acts 18, Apollos is represented as being fervent, eloquent and extremely well versed in the Old Testament scriptures. Therefore it is reasonable to assume that Apollos would have appealed to a different class of Corinthians than did Paul – the more highly educated, wealthy and sophisticated people. Likewise, his preaching was probably lost on Paul's converts.

"I belong to Cephas". The "Peter" or "Cephas" ("Cephas" was "Peter" in Aramaic) party was likely made up of Judaizers who had entered Corinth – Christians who identified with Peter their adherence to Jewish law as essential for salvation. Even though Peter had opened the way of the gospel to the Gentiles through the conversion of the Roman Cornelius (Acts 10), it is evident that Peter was never really comfortable around Gentiles (e.g. Gal. 1:11-14) but preferred the company of Jewish Christians. Therefore, unintentionally, he had become a rallying point for those who would make the church Jewish – the Judaizers.

“I belong to Christ”. Finally, there were likely those who belonged to none of the above three factions, so they created their own fourth party practicing the ultimate “one-upmanship” – the “Christ” party!

The prescription Paul gives for the healing of the fractious Corinthian church is not presented fully until I Corinthians 11:23-33 and II Corinthians 5. His ultimate solution is to remind the church that it can't have a future in a city such as Corinth if they perceive each other as the enemy. Such a church, with such an attitude, will surely die. Instead, if the Corinthian Christians are to become a powerful and transforming force in its city, they will need to overlook their differences, come together regularly in small, face-to-face meetings, not separate into cliques, share their joys, sorrows, concerns and life with each other and in that context, celebrate the Eucharist together. In other words, Paul reminds them that a church can build a relational culture only by being relational – by gathering together in small groups where they can share their lives with each other, “laugh with those who laugh, and weep with those who weep”, and work together to address common issues and pains together. Only in this way will they become truly reconciled with each other and thereby be able to carry out a ministry of reconciliation to all in the city of Corinth itself.

In today's epistle lesson, however, Paul is short in his prescription. First, he thanks God that he did not baptize many of them nor speak with eloquent wisdom (a mild slap at the Apollos clique), but that he proclaimed the gospel simply and directly “so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power”. Second, he concludes this argument by stating, “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (vs. 18). The demands or expectations of the gospel may seem unreasonable to some and unnecessary to others. But it is precisely those demands that are good news to us who are Christians. It is good news to us as we seek to be obedient to such folly, because it is a clear sign to us that we are indeed chosen by God and have been brought by Christ to believe in the Gospel. Such belief has given us an ultimate purpose in life which shapes and guides both our work of ministry and our relationships with each other, so that being one in Christ causes us to be at one with each other.

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