

**“Spirit to spirit” a sermon preached by Kerry Enright on Sunday evening 5 February 2017 at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand, based on 1 Corinthians 2:1-12**

I am trying to follow the struggles in the Roman Catholic Church regarding the approach of Pope Francis.

Much of the world likes his emphasis on mercy, his reluctance to condemn certain practices, his encouragement of dialogue and mutual understanding and acceptance, even while holding to traditional views

But within the church there are people who think he is sending confusing messages because he is not being as clear and forthright as he should be, not as faithful to the clear teaching of the church.

Conservative elements dislike him considerably

Four cardinals have challenged lack of clarity regarding people who are divorced being able to take communion.

They don't like his watering down.

Recently a Catholic organisation called the Knights of Malta became involved in internal difficulties.

The pope intervened to restore order.

In the last day, anti-Pope Francis posters have appeared across Rome. It is suggested they have been placed there by people who seem to take a conservative view.

On the poster is a grim looking Pope. The script beneath asks if he is going to show the same mercy to people who have been “decapitated” – an apparent reference to changes in leadership in the Church - as he is calling for from the church and the people.

No one can remember this happening before, that a Pope is so directly challenged and questioned and criticised.

There seems to be a struggle going on.

Some people are struggling to understand his perspective and approach, as he seems to continue on, somewhat untroubled.

Last November, an Italian prosecutor wondered out loud whether Pope Francis might be under threat from Italian crime bosses. The pope has spoken out against mob corruption and spoken honestly about collusion between elements within the church and the Mafia -- and the fact that it should end. The Vatican Bank is now taking steps to get out of the money laundering business.

As all this unfolded, Pope Francis himself did not seem particularly worried. He is still riding around in a Ford Focus, still connecting with the people.

And so Francis talks about how Jesus chose people rather than popularity, how he stood with the people who were poor rather than seek the favour of people who had influence and say.

This is the kind of tussle going on in Corinth. And Paul is saying something very similar.

“I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.”

He was speaking to a church divided, with people who claimed special wisdom. These people had plenty of followers and they were popular.

To Paul though, it is not in a popularity contest. None of this matters, he says. He and the other leaders are servants. In Galatians Paul says

“May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Galatians 6:14).

The focus is on the cross, on God’s power revealed in weakness not on the imposition of power.

His opponents claim they have a special wisdom from the Holy Spirit, but he says the Spirit points us to the cross, which reveals the very heart of God, the very being of God, the very nature of God.

The Spirit points to the humble way of Jesus Christ, which is folly to those who imagine themselves wise.

Paul says that God remains mystery, and our faith involves a degree of modesty, of not-knowing, of restraint, not claiming we know more than we actually know.

Frederick Buechner has highlighted this aspect of mystery.

He says this:

“There are mysteries which you can solve by taking thought. For instance, a murder-mystery whose mysteriousness must be dispelled in order for the truth to be known. There are other mysteries which do not conceal a truth to think your way to but whose truth is itself the mystery. The mystery of your self, for instance. The more you try to fathom it, the more fathomless it is revealed to be. No matter how much of yourself you are able to objectify and examine, the quintessential living part of yourself will always elude you; i.e., the part that is conducting the examination. Thus you do not solve the mystery, you live the mystery. And you do that not by fully knowing yourself but by fully being yourself.

To say that God is a mystery is to say that you can never nail him down. Even on the cross, the nails proved ultimately ineffective.”

There is a long tradition that takes up the folly of the cross, focusing on it in the face of power and threat, in a counter-cultural way.

This morning I spoke about Shane Claiborne who is coming to Dunedin in a few weeks.

Claiborne is a modern day holy fool, now from Philadelphia. He worked briefly with Mother Teresa in Calcutta and went on a three-week mission in Baghdad during the American bombardment of the city in 2002. He established a community called the simple way and then the Potter Street community, a new monastic community. Claiborne would regularly turn up at the scene of gang violence in Philadelphia and begin juggling and clowning to distract the angry mobs that had gathered there. In the concrete jungle of Philadelphia he has established a community garden and in a world obsessed with fashion and designer labels he makes his own clothes.

Our history is one of fools for Christ and some of the best humour has been inspired by faith because we do not take seriously all of the things that our society takes seriously.

In his book *The Feast of Fools*, Harvey Cox says:

“Like the jester, Christ defies custom and scorns crowned heads. Like a wandering troubadour, he has no place to lay his head. Like the clown in the circus parade, he satirises existing authority by riding into town replete with regal pageantry when he has no earthly power. Like a minstrel, he frequents dinners and parties. At the end, he is consumed by his enemies in a mocking caricature of royal paraphernalia. He is crucified amidst snickers and taunts with a sign over his head that lampoons his laughable claim.”

I have decided to know nothing among you except Christ and him crucified.

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