

“The cross as the power of God” a sermon based on 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 preached by Kerry Enright on Sunday evening 22 January 2017.

Professor Dr Moritz-Maria von Igelfeld was a scholar in a German University. He was an expert on Portuguese irregular verbs and was known as distinguished scholar. As his colleagues celebrated his birthday, he was asked whether there was anything for which he wished.

No, he said, I am happy to go on studying and teaching.

But his colleagues persisted. Surely there was something, they said.

And, unprepared, he blurted, for that is what it felt like to him, he had always wanted to be a visiting scholar at Cambridge. Indeed, he said, boldly, that is exactly what I am going to do, this year.

And his colleagues drank to that, because although some had questions, they thought Igelfeld was a pretty good scholar. Their good wishes were not entirely pure, however, as one of his colleagues had always eyed Prof. von Igelfeld’s corner office and thought how good it would be if he could move in their while the Professor was away.

So they arranged for Dr Igelfeld to receive an invitation from Cambridge which duly arrived. As for himself, Professor Dr von Igelfeld had such hope for Cambridge.

He dreamed of being among the best scholars of the world, heartened by the ground breaking scholarship, their commitment to learning, their high-minded conversation, their principled approach, their desire to hand knowledge to the next generation. He dreamed of what Cambridge might be.

And so he arrived and was welcomed by the Master of the College. Dr von Igelfeld found he did not entirely understand the English idioms and subtleties. In no time he felt at sea with the Master’s conversation, the allusions and idioms.

He tried not to offend the Master or anyone else, but as the Master walked him to his room, the Master suddenly burst into tears. I am terribly sorry, said the Master, but things are a bit hard at the moment. The dons and scholars are being quite critical of me and I am finding it a bit hard. Von Igelfeld was stunned: the Master of the College crying.

He leaned forward and put an arm around the Master’s shoulder, to comfort him.

He was introduced to the Porter who carried his bags to his room, but was later stunned to find the porter at the dining table in the great hall. Who is that, he gently asked the scholar sitting next to him. O that is Dr Porter, one of our distinguished scholars, his colleague said.

But, said Professor von Igelfeld, he carried my bags in to my room. Ahh, he does that, as a prank from time to time, saying that he is a Porter, which he is of course, Dr Porter.

And von Igelfeld found himself very confused and shaken by this, that a scholar would try to fool a visiting academic from another country. And so very quickly, within a day or two, von Igelfeld found himself drawn into the conflicts and factions and challenges in the College. And within a day or two, he longed to return to the Institute in Germany in which he worked.

His hope of inspired scholarship, scintillating conversations, high minded acting, heartening study, had confronted the reality of humanity. It is a story told by Alexander McCall Smith in his book *At the Villa of Reduced Circumstances*.

Those of us who look on institutions can imagine them as bastions of the best of their field and find they are susceptible to the most appalling conflicts.

It happens in theological seminaries. It happens in governments. It happens in bowling clubs. And it happens in churches.

It does not take much surface-scratching before even the most outstanding of churches is revealed as a hotbed of conflict, of demeaning conversations and cheap shots and competing factions. And, sadly, for many of us, it really shakes us, and for new Christians it can be what stops them going any further.

But these are meant to be followers of Jesus, people say. Is Jesus so powerless, so ineffective, that he cannot enable a small group of people to get on with each other for his message? Is he so remote and uninvolved that he cannot change people's behaviour to fit what he calls from them?

And so it becomes very quickly a question about the credibility of the gospel.

And so it should.

If God cannot form a group of people into a body of people living out the way of Jesus then isn't a whole lot of stuff up for grabs?

And Paul sensed that, so soon after Jesus had left his message. He realised there was a lot at stake.

It seems that different parts of the Corinthian church identified with different preachers they had heard. So some identified with Apollos, some with Cephas. Which is not unusual in moderation.

Certain people in the church have influenced us in particular ways, and so we look to them and to their way when we have to deal with an issue.

But in Corinth, it had become factionalised. Not just people used for reference, but parties that had become factions. In reality, factions are a major problem in the church.

Not just in congregations, But in denominations, In the world-wide Christian movement.

I am very sure that Paul and the early Christians would never have imagined denominations as we know them.

In denominations we say, we belong to Rome, or we belong to Luther, or we belong to Calvin, or we belong to Wesley, or I belong to the church of Christ – factions.

I am with those who believe that theological factions and denominations are inherently sinful and we should be doing what we can to overcome them. Such division is a scandal and a denial of the power of the gospel to overcome division.

No less is that true of the way churches speak of themselves as if they are superior to others as if they are more truthful or more faithful or have better music or advanced theology or stronger spiritual life.

Scott Hoezee of Calvin Seminary suggested, and I extend his examples a little ...

... When we make the quality of our preaching or our music programme or our engagement with the community or our particular history or our theological identity the be-all and end-all of our worship and spiritual life together, then we have fallen into the trap of the Corinthians ...

We have supplanted the gospel with something of secondary significance.

The theologian Robert Jenson goes on to highlight another dynamic:

“In history, the Christian Church has found itself in a host of very different cultures, times, and places. We know that our modern world looks and feels vastly different from the world that existed even a century or two ago, let alone a thousand years ago.

Even so, Jenson observed, when it comes to the basic beliefs of the Christian faith, we ought to have more in common with someone like the apostle Paul from long ago than with non-Christians alive right now. If third-century Christians could see a modern church sanctuary, they would likely be stunned. But no matter how agog such folks would be to see electric lights or to hear a pipe organ, even still, if they could somehow across the centuries listen in on our worship, then we could only pray that the *message* that they

would hear from us in the year 2017 would be the same gospel they heard back in the year 217. If it were not, if we had allowed the modern world to alter our Christian proclamation and beliefs, then we could not properly claim to belong to the true Church. No matter how bizarre the setting of the modern world would be to Christians from the distant past, the *message* that gets proclaimed should still be so true to the Bible, that any Christian from any time or place would be able to hear what we say and respond, "Yup! That's my hope, too! That's still the same gospel message of God's love that changed my whole life so long ago!"

To counter factionalism, Paul holds before us the cross of Christ.

In response to this partisan bickering, Paul brings people back to the story that defines us all as the people of God: the crucifixion of Christ. "*Paul* was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized into the name of Paul?" (1 Corinthians 1:13).

It is important that we not allow ourselves to separate these two questions. The first speaks to the story of God's action to save a people; the second speaks to how we come to play a part in that drama. Christ's own crucifixion saves us; and, our baptism into his name makes us "Christ people," which also signifies, "a people of the cross."

For Paul, the ramifications of party spirit are nothing less than a denial of the gospel itself. The story says that Christ is crucified, and when we act as though anything else (or anyone else) defines who we are then we deny the story of our salvation and we corrupt our true identity.

The cross and our participation in it by baptism makes us one with all Christians around the world.

It marks our identity.

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