

Ministry of All

Isaiah 49:1-7
1 Corinthians 1:1-9
John 1:29-42

Introduction to the theme

What's the story of your name? Invite a few people to share the how their parents chose their name.

In Biblical times names were considered to say something about the individual – it was more than simply the noise made to get a person's attention. In our Gospel story, we will hear of Simon's name being changed to Peter, and in our Epistle, we will hear Paul writing to a particular (and named) church. If Jesus was here calling you as a disciple, like Simon, what name might he give you? What does that say about the ministry to which you are called?

Reflection

One of my preaching commentaries notes that it is always very easy to simply skip past the opening of Paul's letters. After all, they all follow the same formulae, which is adapted from the standard letter writing methodology of his day. Add to this that usually there is a good story in the Gospel or Old Testament reading, and one can understand why the opening of a letter rarely rates a mention in a reflection.

Well, perhaps it was because of this commentator, or perhaps because the Gospel reading is once again the Baptism of Jesus, although that could make some interesting comparisons, but something challenged me to look again at this opening of 1st Corinthians.

Of all the undisputed letters of Paul, it is only the Corinthian church who received more than one piece of correspondence that has come down to us, though in the case of the Corinthian church – and possibly others – there are multiple letters we know have been lost.

So, the Corinthian church received a larger than usual number of letters from Paul, which suggests firstly, they knew him well and, secondly, they had issues that he needed to address. Well, we read about those issues throughout this letter, but importantly we also get an overview – of both the issues and a potted version of Paul's theology – in this introductory section.

The first point we hear is in the second word of our English translation – called. And this is a word that is repeated through the opening, with different variations (some of which gets lost in the translation). Paul emphasises he has been "called" and the church are "called to be saints." This is not saints as they later came to be known, but rather the ordinary Christians in the community being called to be "saints," to be the "holy ones."

Right from the start, Paul reminds his readers that being called is not simply something about those who are in official leadership positions. It is not only apostles, or these days, ministers, who are called, but every member of the Christian community. In our Protestant

tradition we speak of the ministry of all believers, which reflects this idea. And it is important to remember our ministry can change throughout our lives. When I worked as an aged care chaplain many of the people for whom I cared had been busy and active members of the church. Once they were in aged care, they were unable to minister in the way they had previously, but that did not mean they did not have a ministry. Indeed, even in aged care, they had two very important ministries – one was having the time to listen, and the other having the time to pray. So just because we cannot do what we were previously called to do, does not mean we no longer have any calling, just simply that our calling has changed.

The next point of emphasis in this introduction of the letter is that of grace.

Using the phrase “grace and peace” is common to Paul’s letters and he uses it to adapt the more usual greeting in letters. Grace is one of Paul’s big themes in his theology; it’s something he gets before the other apostles. Where, according to Acts, the other apostles argue that one has to follow the Jewish Torah in order to be a “good” Christian, Paul argues it is all about God’s grace. If there are still rules and regulations that need to be followed, then Christ died for nothing. Although the emphasis on grace is less in Corinthians than in some of Paul’s other epistles, he still manages to slip it in, quite simply because it is that important that he cannot miss it out.

However, grace does not allow living as we want. Paul will later write to the Romans:

Should we sin more so grace will increase? By no means!

With the issues the Corinthian church is facing, there is a distinct need for grace, as well as a reminder of what grace is (and is not).

The final point, which is developed in great detail through the letter, is the question of gifts. The Corinthian community had fractured into groups arguing whose gifts are most important. They had developed a hierarchy based on the gifts that people had and this was a point of contention.

Paul affirms they already have all the spiritual gifts they need, but these have not been developed into their completion. He is, of course, talking to a group (the “you” is plural) not an individual and this is an important distinction. When they are together, in community, they do have all their spiritual gifts.

What is the completion of the spiritual gifts to which he hints? Well, if we skip forward to chapter 12 where he is writing about this in more detail, he talks about the different gifts that we have and there is no gift without its corresponding ministry. We hear something of this in our service to commission church leaders, which is based on that passage:

There are diverse gifts;

but it is the same Spirit who gives them.

There are different ways of serving God:

but it is the same Lord who is served.

God works through people in different ways:

but it is the same God

whose purpose is achieved through them all.

Each one of us is given a gift by the Spirit:

and there is no gift without its corresponding service.

There is one ministry of Christ:

and in this ministry we all share.

Together we are the body of Christ:

and individually members of it

[Based on I Corinthians 12:4ff and Basis of Union, para. 13]

Our readings today get fragmented, so it is quite easy to forget what comes next. After this talk about spiritual gifts, he launches into what has become one of his most famous passages:

If I speak in the tongues of humans 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.

And so, the bringing the spiritual gifts, into completion happens with the gift of love.

As we think about this passage for our congregation today, I wonder which of these points connects with you. What might we look like as a community when we truly live out our calling, sharing God's grace, and having our spiritual gifts brought to their completion with God's love?