

# The Parish of Bardsey with East Keswick

## Sermon

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### **Sunday 22 January 2023: Angela Hannafin**

Good morning and welcome to another Sofa Sermon. Today we're going to be thinking about the tricky subject of unity, and we'll be looking at Paul's letter to the church in Corinth to help us navigate through.

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<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose. <sup>11</sup> For some members of Chloe's household have told me about your quarrels, my dear brothers and sisters. <sup>12</sup> Some of you are saying, "I am a follower of Paul." Others are saying, "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Peter," or "I follow only Christ."

<sup>13</sup> Has Christ been divided into factions? Was I, Paul, crucified for you? Were any of you baptized in the name of Paul? Of course not! <sup>14</sup> I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup> for now no one can say they were baptized in my name. <sup>16</sup> (Oh yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas, but I don't remember baptizing anyone else.) <sup>17</sup> For Christ didn't send me to baptize, but to preach the Good News—and not with clever speech, for fear that the cross of Christ would lose its power. <sup>18</sup> The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God.

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Leadership was complicated in the early church. Some of the believers were following the new leaders: Peter, or Paul, or Apollos. Incidentally we don't know a lot about Apollos, but Paul mentions him when he says that he planted the seed and Apollos watered it. Perhaps Apollos had a different style of leadership. Some people were not just following Christ. This might sound odd to us but two thousand years ago the church members were still trying to work out what Christianity meant when they had been brought up with so many Jewish laws to follow, and now had new leaders with different approaches to what it meant to believe. There were no creeds to make it clear what Christians thought. Personalities and individual beliefs could sway people. Paul makes it clear here that their lack of unity is a problem, leading to arguments. This is a continued theme through the early church. Paul and Silas have a big bust up at some point in the book of Acts which results in both of them going their own ways and taking team Paul and Team Silas with them. But if we go back to the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed that his followers would be one. Paul picks this up

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here, encouraging the believers to live in harmony, to have no divisions, to be one. This is what God wants.

This week the Church of England released a statement saying that for the first time, same sex couples will be able to receive a recognition of their union through a blessing in church. Congregations will be encouraged to welcome same sex couples. An official apology will be issued to LGBTQ+ people by the church, acknowledging the rejection they have received and how it has impacted them. You will have your own reaction to this. For some it's not enough, as they want to see an extension of marriage to same sex people and for others it's too much, as they see the current definition of marriage as something sacred. As for me, I'm pleased with this step forward, particularly as our own parish has signed up to be an Inclusive Church. I will also be more than pleased to offer a blessing to those LGBTQ+ people who would like it. I hope this will be a step towards unity, and that we will conduct ourselves in loving ways as we debate this at General Synod in a couple of weeks' time. Please do pray for all who will be there, including myself, as it will no doubt be an emotive time for many who are part of the LGBTQ+ community and who feel that the church has not supported them, as well as others who believe that their own way is right.

Unity matters. British people are not good on the whole as a country at dealing with difference in opinion, since it jars with our desire to be polite. Conflict in our country can often be seen as rudeness. Christians are often the worst at dealing with conflict. And when God wants us to live so that we are of one mind, united in thought and purpose, it's clear that the church across the nation and world, does not reflect unity. So what can we do when it seems we can't get to where God wants us to be?

I was on a 'conflict' course this week, ironically enough, where it was said that conflict, if handled well, can be creative. We may agree to disagree which if we can honestly live with this, is not a cop out, but a sign of strength. The Church of England has produced the Five Guiding Principles, which date back to 2013, to help bring unity to those who disagreed with the issue of women's ordination. The Five Guiding Principles are there to create 'mutual flourishing' so that even with personal differing beliefs, we can grow in our faith and become the best person God wants us to be. I wonder if we need to remember the Five Guiding Principles at a time when individual flourishing seems to take precedent over mutual flourishing. Interestingly, our own Bishop Nick has written to the clergy this week and says this about unity, "the bishops in the Diocese of Leeds do not hold the same views, but we are not divided in any sense. Indeed, there is great

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strength in a team such as ours holding a diversity of understandings – everything we say gets challenged. If 'repentance' means anything, it must be rooted in 'conversion' – literally (from the Greek *metanoia*), a change of mind. No Christian can close their mind without closing off the possibility that God might call us to repent precisely in the areas in which we feel most strongly rooted". So as a disciple of Christ, everything we have belongs to him, even our opinion, which he may want us to change.

It's worth noting that this extract from the letter to the Corinthians ends not with a dissection of who said what and who follows who, but a reminder of the importance of the cross of Christ. Hebrews 9 tells us, Christ "has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself". The death of Christ is for all, and anyone who trusts in him will receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life. This is the good news of Jesus Christ. Because of our union with Christ, we also have union with each another. We have brothers and sisters in Christ. Through his death, we have relationship with God and a bond with one another that is far stronger than even what we believe. In the cross, we are unified.

So let's pray that our church may be seen as a body of integrity and unity, where we can live in harmony with our own differing opinions but recognise our bond of love through the cross. May we also examine our own beliefs before God, because he may want to speak into them, and even change them. In this way, we can bring glory to God. AMEN.

Some things to reflect on:

- Bring your own views on same sex unions before God.
- Pray for your Bishop and all in authority at this difficult time. Pray too for members of General Synod, meeting soon.
- Is there anything you could do today and this week which will express your unity in the church? Could you reach out to someone today who has a different opinion to you?

Let's pray,

Holy God, we recognise our need of you in this area, and pray for your Spirit to cleanse us where we have created conflict or not been brave enough to strive for unity. We pray that we will be one, and that our unity, even with difference, may bring glory to you. In Jesus name. AMEN.