

In today's passage from 1 Corinthians the drama kicks off with the arrival of a letter. Chloe's people have taken it upon themselves to inform Paul that all is far from well with the congregation at Corinth and in an act of sheer desperation they have put pen to paper, or more likely reed pen and parchment to set before Paul the problem.

We read: *"For 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.' Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul". (11-13)*

Here we have a hint of just how serious these divisions are becoming when one group takes it upon themselves to report to Paul about everyone else. "Chloe's people", have obviously had enough and want things sorted. Is this a brave step in a plea for church unity or more a case of taking to the moral high ground?

This opening verse reminds me of one of Alan Bennett's monologues in 'Talking Heads' where Irene Ruddock dashes off letters with her trusty fountain pen, complaining and pointing out the failures of others – till the police come by, then it becomes apparent that it is Irene who is in trouble.

Still there was no denying it, there was trouble in Corinth - the church was fracturing round multiple leaders. First of all, there were those who stayed loyal to Paul, after all he started the church. They came to know Christ through Paul, and Paul was the one they we're going to listen to above all the leaders.

Others followed Apollos. We know that Apollos was "an eloquent man" (Acts 18:24), "powerful in public debate" (Acts 18:28). Such rhetorical force might have formed a good platform for the Apollos party. Perhaps this lies behind Paul's insistence that true proclamation of the Gospel does not require such eloquence (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

Then there were those who followed Cephas (traditionally understood to be the apostle Peter) however exactly who he was is a bit more difficult to pin down. We can't say for sure that Peter ever visited Corinth, but we do know that the church had heard about the apostle Peter, the great pillar of the church, the great apostle to the Jews, one of the original twelve -

Paul wasn't one of the original twelve, neither was Apollos - but this man was. Reading between the lines it may have been that Cephas or his followers introduced theological tensions into Corinth by bringing in the same sort of conservative, law-keeping Christianity that caused conflict between Paul and Cephas at Antioch (Galatians 2:11-14).

In fourth place we have the Christ party. You could be forgiven in thinking that this group had a lot going for them as followers of Christ. They were not followers of mere men but of Christ himself. They had the hot-line to God. They would not follow Paul or Apollos or Peter, they were too holy for that for they belonged to Christ; but Christ belonged to them and not to any of these other leaders.

Paul has a mammoth task before him in unifying this fractious bunch with all their partisan bickering. His response is to bring them 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?" (1:13).

These are two foundational questions concerning our faith. The first speaks of the story of God's action to save a people to himself; the second speaks to how we come to play a part in that drama. Christ's crucifixion saves us, and our baptism into his name makes us "Christ people."

For Paul, the ramifications of party spirit are nothing less than a denial of the Gospel itself. The New Testament is clear: 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.

Every blessing Linda

