

Ecstasy+Responsibility+Intelligibility=Love
Epiphany 2, Year C
1 Corinthians 12: 4-11
17 January 2010

Just suppose that a pagan new age cult had begun in Christchurch, whose dramatic worship rapidly attracted large crowds. A highlight of their gatherings would be the in-group devotees working themselves up into a state of ecstasy, in which they would be entranced and possessed by powerful spiritual forces. In this Spirit possessed state they would call out outlandish religious statements – “All hail the Dalai Lama – the Christian God is dead – Bob Parker is the anti-Christ.”

Maybe that sounds wacky to us, but it is not too far removed from what the Corinthians would have been used to in their pagan days before they turned to Christ. That is why in the verse just before the start of today’s second reading Paul writes, “no one who says “A curse on Jesus!” can be speaking under the influence of the Spirit of God.” There were plenty of spirits around in pagan religion, and there was lots of interest in the kind of spiritual activity they engendered. Enigmatic messages from the other side about difficult life decisions – the pleasure and release of ecstatic rituals – dramatic and impressive initiation ceremonies – all of this was on offer from a smorgasbord of cults and religious associations. Maybe we think we are beyond all that now, but take a look at the New Age shop in Stanmore Rd by the Worcester St intersection. Every time I walk past it I am reminded of G K Chesterton’s saying, “When men stop believing in God they start believing in everything.”

So when the Corinthians sign up to Christianity they are carrying some unhelpful baggage about the kind of Spirit they think that they have welcomed in to their lives. Paul must now unscramble this mess. What he has to say is of value to us also.

What has gone wrong with the Corinthian religious worldview is, as Gordon Fee points out, that they have become fascinated with spiritual activity as an end in itself. So even legitimate expressions of the Spirit in their worship and prayer have begun to acquire a pagan edge to them, because they are more about feeling spiritually accomplished and entertained than about exalting Christ.

This flaw has led to other troubles in the Corinthian Church. They are divided because the dominant group think of themselves as a kind of spiritual aristocracy who are rich in spiritual gifts of a dramatic experiential kind. Those who can't front up with this kind of impressive spiritual behaviour are thought of as religious under achievers.

And that has deepened other divisions. The city of Corinth is full of nouveau riche, flash harries who are in to vulgar displays of wealth and status. The spiritual aristocracy bring this social pathology in to the Sunday Love Feast, at which the Eucharist is celebrated. Their picnic baskets have been filled at the best delicatessens that Corinth has to offer, so the poor members of the Church look on at the gastronomic guzzling at top table in famished irritation.

There are two other gone wrong features of the Corinthian Church. The spiritual elite believes that every other believer's Christian walk should be the same as theirs. Spectacular spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues got them under way in the faith,

and since then they have majored in all the other supernatural glamorous gifts. So they think the Church should be uniform in its style of Christian believing. There should be a quality of sameness in Church life.

And it can be hard to make sense of what is going on at Corinthian Sunday Services. When they get to the part of the Service, which they enjoy the most, when the ecstasy rituals are in full swing, the babble of exotic languages and the extravagant body language are very much an in house activity. What would an outsider who was visiting your worship assembly make of all this, is an inconvenient question that Paul will put to them?

1 Corinthians 12, which we heard a portion of this morning, is Paul's prescription for these troubles. Be ecstatic in your style of Christian devotion says Paul - I am ecstatic myself. But be responsible also, thinking always of your brothers and sisters in Christ, and what is in their best interests. The name of the game is love – that is the quality and style of our life together in Christ in the Church. So get rid of this spiritual pride that thinks some are better than others because they have a taste for fascinating spiritual practices. And start making some generous minded, practical arrangements for the way the Love Feast is organised so it really is what it says it is – a Love Feast. Be intelligible also. The spiritual gifts that need to be on display at your worship assemblies are the ones that will communicate the Christian faith to others. The main business of the Church is preaching the gospel to outsiders and to unbelievers. So prefer the gifts that will make this a possible and likely outcome of what you do together.

And treasure diversity amongst your membership. God is diversity in unity in himself. He loves difference in the Church. He gives spiritual gifts as he wills in such a way as to build up a rich variety of mutually supporting ministries that makes the Church interesting and multi talented.

The spiritual gifts that are listed in today's second reading have become a rich hunting ground for those who love to organise, systematise and prioritise the good things that God has to give. But that misses the point entirely. Paul has plucked these items at random, out of the air so to speak, to make it clear that God gives what is required at the time to make the Church grow in the particular circumstances it is facing. The gifts are given for a useful purpose for the common good, and not for private spiritual enrichment. They come and they go as God pleases, and they are not just given to special people with an unusual spiritual aptitude. They are not a private possession, and you can't as it were take them home. Their purpose is to make Jesus known in the common assembly in such a way as to edify and instruct believers, and to convince outsiders.

Thank goodness Holy Trinity Avonside isn't like the Church at Corinth, we might be thinking right now. We don't practise swinging from the chandeliers religion. You would never see slaying in the Spirit at our Services, and the Toronto blessing is not known here. If some of our members are speaking in tongues then they keep it to themselves. In general we practise a low temperature religion, free from any ecstasy rituals.

If 1 Corinthians 12 is a health warning to turbo charged spirit led churches, it also puts an

uncomfortable question to churches like ours. Have we allowed this passage of Scripture to become a dead letter, as the Church did in general for 1900 years? Do we think that those kind of spiritual practices only took place back then at the beginning, but they have no place in our life now? In a sense we have the Pentecostal churches, and the rise of charismatic religion in the mainline churches, to thank for putting today's reading back on the agenda. The charismatic movement has waned in its influence in our church from where it was in the 70's and 80's. There has been a resurgence of conservative evangelicalism, and many of the other holiness movements in the Anglican Church have lost the fire in their bellies. But the Holy Spirit always bursts in on the Church in new and unpredictable ways at a time when no one expects. No one saw the charismatic movement coming. And that is the way it will be when the Holy Spirit pours out his gifts on the Church again. The question is will we be ready and willing for that to happen at Holy Trinity Avonside.

I hope the answer is yes, because when Christians shove a spiritually alive Spirit led Church back in to the first century, and deny that it can ever happen now, they often end up settling for a life of ordinariness that takes all the sparkle out of our religion. And there is that other embarrassing agenda item that Paul raises in the epistle to the Corinthians – the one about the primary business of the Church being to preach the gospel to outsiders and unbelievers. Would our scorecard be much different to the Corinthians on that count?

I have called this sermon ecstasy plus responsibility plus intelligibility equals love. You could argue I suppose that we have got responsibility and

intelligibility, and a reasonable amount of love – we are just a little short of ecstasy.