

Recently we thought about Pentecost – the day Christians specifically remember that God poured out his Holy Spirit on Jesus' followers in Jerusalem and that they began to worship God in languages they had not learned. Because there were people from all over the Mediterranean in Jerusalem they heard about God in their own language. 3000 people became Christians that day and the church was born.

All of these were joined by thousands more over the next few years as the church grew. But it must have been difficult to know what to do in order to live out this new faith – they didn't have a bible to help them! At first it was mainly Jewish people and was based around worship at the Temple so they understood that, but it was quite limiting and when non-Jewish people started coming to faith they didn't have the background knowledge that Jewish Christians had. Often their background involved worship of other gods and sometimes involved ritual prostitution or food sacrifices – some of their practices needed to stop.

Paul had written to the Christians in Corinth because they had been doing things when they met together that were not good or helpful. Corinth was a city that was full of statues to different gods and a lot of the worship of those gods involved sacrificing animals. When the rituals were finished they hadn't used all of the meat and they didn't want it going to waste so some of it was taken home and eaten.

Some of the Christians were worried about what they should do if they were offered food that had been offered in sacrifice to another god. Paul's answer was unless someone tells you that it has been sacrificed just eat what you're given and thank God for it.

In ch 12 he goes into a long section about the conduct of public worship – what we're doing today. He talks about the roles of men and women and he really gets stuck into them about the way they were having communion. The rich people were starting before everyone else and they were having a full-blown meal so that some people were getting drunk and others had nothing. He instructs them to eat together and share what they had.

They were also wrong in their thinking about spiritual gifts – gifts given to the people of God by Holy Spirit. He says these gifts are given for 'the common good'. I don't think that is limited to Christians – I think he means that these gifts are of benefit to everyone.

However, just like communion, some people were using their gift unwisely, sometimes to make themselves seem important, so Paul uses a picture of the body to explain what he means. He says that the different parts of the body don't say to each other we don't need you. He lists some gifts people may have: Apostle, prophet, teacher, healing, guidance, speaking in tongues. Not every Christian will have all of the gifts but everyone has at least one of the gifts. They all come from God and are to be used to serve God – one is not better than another.

Then he goes on to say that the most important thing we have is love. When he writes to the Christians in Philippi he tells them that he has prayed for them - *So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Philippians 1:9*

That's the kind of love he's talking about here as well. Then we come to the passage we read today. If you don't know the rest of the story today's reading is a bit strange. It's a bit strange

to us anyway. People bringing words from God and others speaking in different languages!
Verse 5 I would like every one of you to speak in tongues,^[b] but I would rather have you prophesy.

Verse 26

When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.

Verse 31 For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.

I don't think we've ever had a time in church like Paul describes. For those who like things done in a more traditional way in church I'm really happy to go back to this: where people eagerly desire the gifts of God, not for themselves, but to build other people up.
Examples.....

Yet again though the Corinthians were getting it wrong! They were talking away in tongues but they weren't helping anyone because nobody understood what they were saying. Paul is saying that all of our actions in worship should be a reflection of the love we have for God and for each other.

This got me thinking. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth and explained where they were going wrong – I wonder what he would write to us?

They thought they were ok and would have pointed to what they thought were good things they were doing. Paul talks about attitude and relationship – where they were with God and how that was lived out with each other.

It's not so much what we do but how authentic what we do is. We need to try and make our space welcoming, we need to try and make as clear as possible the simple things like when to stand and when to sit. We need to use music that is understandable and the language of our prayers and sermons should be easy to understand. All of those things are important but, much more important is the effect all of it has on us. Are we changing? Are we more like Jesus? Is there passion in what we do – do we really believe it and mean it? Is it authentic?