

### Epiphany 3

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Revd Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 26 January 2020

*Readings: 1 Corinthians 1 vv 10-18 and Matthew 4 vv 12-23*

Stained glass and statues have a lot to answer for in the life of the church. One of the biggest problems is that they present the saints as static, frozen in time, in glass or in stone. Butter wouldn't melt in their mouths, it seems. But the saints weren't like that. They were human beings, like you and me. The difference is that they were that bit closer to God than we are. Well, significantly closer than I am. It would be presumptuous to draw that conclusion about you, of course!

The New Testament presents us with a more honest and realistic picture – a long way from any sort of propaganda. St Peter is shown with many all too recognisable human characteristics – enthusiasm, anger, pride, fierce loyalty, fear and so much more. There's no doubting his humanity and the deep faith that emerges from it, anchored in his encounter with the living Jesus and transformed by his experience of Jesus' death on the cross and the resurrection.

St Paul, whose feast day was observed yesterday, is also a human being whom we can recognise. Less sympathetic than Peter, perhaps; having a meal with Paul might be less fun than a meal with Peter. But Paul is no prig. He may have a forceful message to give to the new Christians who had come to faith in the places which he had visited, but Paul's humanity shines through – both in the accounts of Paul's conversion and his missionary journeys in the Acts of the Apostles and in the glimpses of Paul's personality and human struggles that we can see through his letters to the young churches – which are admittedly sometimes quite dense and closely argued.

And to be fair to St Paul, the young churches, the new communities where he had brought so many to faith, did sometimes give him a hard time. So, like any of us, Paul warmed to friendship and support and a positive reaction. We can read Paul's warm appreciation of the personal support he received from the church in Philippi:

'I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.'

However, Paul has to write in much stronger terms to come of the other churches. The church at Corinth presented particular problems. In a lively, cosmopolitan city, anything went. And so Paul has to speak strongly to the Corinthian church:

'I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children.'

Paul's admonishing is about arrogance, sexual immorality, lawsuits between members of the Christian community, eating food offered to pagan gods, a lack of generosity, and more.

‘So I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit. For I wrote to you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.’

But what seems to upset Paul most of all is the lack of unity which leads to what one commentator describes as a ‘Eurovision song contest’ beauty parade, in which the different preachers or different people who have baptised new converts have their own following. This horrifies Paul. He appeals for a change of attitude in the name of Jesus Christ who alone is the foundation of the gospel. When a preacher or a minister of baptism gets in the way between the hearer and Christ, things are badly awry. When people are more interested in the preacher than the message of the gospel, when they are more interested in who baptised them than the transforming event of initiation into Christ, they have missed the point. There may be room for affectionate remembering of particular Christians who have influenced our journey of faith; but not if this detracts from Christ.

‘For Christ did not send me to baptise but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.’

The effectiveness and the power of the gospel depend not on the eloquence and persuasive power of the preacher; but on the power of the cross.

A gospel based on a Saviour crucified like a common criminal can only appear absurd and laughable in the world’s terms.

‘For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.’

But that very foolishness becomes life transforming and life changing when the true significance dawns in our hearts and minds; and when we understand that in Jesus ‘the kingdom of heaven has come near’ – as we hear him saying in today’s gospel reading.

And when we understand that, our lives are changed – as were the lives of the first disciples ‘who left the boat ... and followed Jesus’.