

Twenty-sixth Sunday *per annum*

Year A, 2026

Ez 18:25-28 Phil 2:1-11

Ps 25 Mt 21:28-32

The oneness desired by Christ

For the second Sunday in a row, our second reading is taken from St Paul's letter to the fledgling Christian community in the Greek city of Philippi. This is one of Paul's most personal and tender letters, exemplified by the way he expresses himself toward the Philippians and by how he speaks of the Lord Jesus.

Christians were a tiny, tiny minority in all the world during the lifetime of St Paul. The few Christ-followers in Philippi were a mix of converts from Judaism and from Greek paganism. The world all around them, not unlike the world today, was fractured into many distinct factions of every sort – ethnic factions, cultural factions, political factions, religious factions, economic factions, educational factions, factions based on status, wealth, health, standing, and the list goes on.

In the midst of these factions, and the fractured nature of human society, St Paul urged the Philippians to lay aside all that might divide them and to seek unity, telling them to *"be of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing."* But how can such unity be possible? For man, it is impossible, but for God, all things are possible (Mt 19:26). And Paul knows this, so he prefaces his admonition in this way: *"If there is any encouragement in Christ, any solace in love, any participation in the Spirit, any compassion and*

mercy" ... then be of one mind and heart, united in one love, thinking one thing. And what is that one thing, but Christ himself?

This unity among disciples of which Paul speaks cannot happen except that it occurs by, with, and in Christ, by, with, and in love, and by, with, and in the Spirit. To think one thing, Christ Jesus, is to have the mind of Christ, which calls for surrendering my thoughts so that his thoughts can triumph in me. In another letter, St Paul writes: *"we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ"* (2 Cor 10:5). To have the heart of Christ means to surrender my desires so that what Christ desires can prevail in me, to let Christ have my heart. In yet another letter, St Paul writes: *"let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body"* (Col 3:15).

Have the mind of Christ. Have the heart of Christ. Love Christ. Think Christ. Live, breathe, give, receive Christ. This is how the body of disciples will experience unity and *"be of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing."*

In a world fractured by so many divisions, the little flock of Christian disciples is meant to be an exemplar of unity, not of division; a place of peace-making, not of power-seizing. And such unity, explains the Apostle, cannot be attained except that there be *"compassion and mercy"* in and among the various members of the community of believers toward one another.

Now, if we know how to read between the lines, we can perceive that there were problems from the start. Human nature being what

it is – fallen human nature – controversies and divisions, arguments and factions abounded, and right from the beginning, and even among the first Christian disciples. Why else would St Paul have been encouraging the Philippians to unity if not for the threat of disunity and strife? So the Apostle continues: *“Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but also for those of others.”*

These words of Paul, inspired as they are by the Holy Spirit, have been kept safe and transmitted to us down through the centuries, not as a mere historical artifact, but as a critical component of Christian discipleship. We are not to put our own interests first, but those of others, as Christ did. We are not to act out of selfishness or for self-promotion and self-aggrandizement, but in humility, as Christ did.

If the Christian community *back then* could not live in exemplary unity ... and if the Christian community *now* cannot put aside its petty divisions and its sources of strife, then how are we Christians to be what the Lord wishes us to be: the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Mt 5:13-14)? How are we to be the little bit of yeast that makes the lump of dough rise (Mt 13:33), if we are seeking only our own interests and making war on one another, needlessly sowing the seeds of division and disunity even within the Church?

Differences aside, can we not see the common humanity that we all share, a humanity assumed by Christ, redeemed by Christ Jesus, and

called to unity among ourselves in Christ Jesus as the one body of the Lord? Can we, as Christians, not acknowledge the inherent worth and dignity of others, even those who may be ideologically, politically, or even religiously opposed to us, even if they are opposed to us specifically because we are Christians? What do we seek, reconciliation and unity or recrimination and division? From what you know of Christ, which of these do you think is of his Spirit? And which do you think is of the evil one?

It profits us nothing to pay lip service to the apostolic injunction to unity when by our attitudes, words, and actions we foster separation and division. In matters that pertain to the faith, in matters that pertain to family cohesion and harmony, in matters that pertain to our community at large, in matters personal and political, private and public, in matters local and national, I should examine myself – my attitudes, my thoughts, my words, my deeds – and discover to what extent I am a force for the unity called for by the gospel. If I discover that something in me is an obstacle to unity, then it is not too late. Like the first son in the gospel, I can change my mind (conversion and *metanoia*) and go out to do the work that my father sends me to do. Or in the words of St Paul, I can “*have in [me] the same attitude that is also in Christ Jesus, who ... emptied himself ... humbled himself*” to be obedient to the will of his Father, who “*was reconciling the world to himself in Christ*” (2 Cor 5:19). And what is reconciliation if not the work of unity, the fruit of “*compassion and mercy*” toward one another?

If this seems like foolishness, like impossibility, like a child's wish, then I refer you to another of Paul's letters, 1 Corinthians, where he decimates such thinking as belonging to the "*wisdom of this age*" and to "*the rulers of this age who are passing away*" (2:6). Paul, who has "*the mind of Christ*," (1 Cor 2:16), speaks "*a wisdom to those who are mature*" (1 Cor 2:6), to "*the spiritual person*" (1 Cor 2:15) who, "*taught by the Spirit*," can understand "*spiritual realities in spiritual terms*" (1 Cor 2:13).

And so, as would-be disciples of Christ, we have a *charge* laid upon us and a *choice* to make. The *charge* is to be agents of unity. The *choice* is between the wisdom and truth of gospel or the folly and falsehood of the world. Which shall we choose, to be like the obedient son in today's gospel, who does his father's will, or like the rebellious son, who seeks his own?

Loving unity among believers was something desired by Jesus himself, who prayed for this at the Last Supper, when he said: "*I pray ... so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me... that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me and that you loved them even as you loved me*" (Jn 17:20-23). These words of the Savior give a certain urgency and cogency, I think, to what St Paul admonished: "*be of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing,*" "*striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace*" (Eph 4:3).