

3 Epiphany – Year A – January 26, 2011 - Homily
Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27: 1, 5-13; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23
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Some of you may have heard of Rolf Harris. He's 80 years old now, but when I was a kid he had a TV show in which he sang and drew wall size pictures and portraits on huge canvases with the kind of paintbrushes we would use to paint the side of a house. Born in Australia, Harris is a gifted artist, singer and entertainer. Perhaps Harris' most famous song was *Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport*. Yet at least in my opinion, it was always his artwork that captured, and absolutely mesmerized his audience. The brush would flick fast and furious across the canvas, a dash here and a stroke there, from gallon sized pots of paint. He would laugh, talk and joke all the time he was painting. As the artist, his visualization and perspective were incredible, because as viewers, we could never see the whole picture until it was literally just a few strokes from being completed. And then with a flick of the brush, the final effect was beyond stunning. The picture or portrait would spring to life, as if waiting for the master's final touch to bring it into a kind of living, breathing reality.

Tonight's reading from 1 Corinthians makes me think of the Apostle Paul as an artist of God's grace and faith. In this reading, Paul begins the process of drawing out the bigger picture for the rather worldly Corinthians, who have taken to impressing one another with their rhetoric and one-upmanship. God is not pleased, and neither is Paul. The reports he has been getting tell him that something has gone array with this fledgling community. And so here we have Paul's letter that gives us the clues to what he is dealing with, and how he is going to help the Corinthians get back on track through broadening their perspective, and showing them glimpses of the bigger picture.

Paul immediately addresses the reports of divisions and quarrels that have reached him. It's comforting to know that divisions are not new to the Body of Christ, but it is clearly painful to Paul and should be painful to us when we finally realize that we too are failing to see the bigger picture at those times. Paul uses a familial term, "brothers and sisters" to address the Corinthians, and refers to baptism. That reminds us that by God's grace, we are members of Christ's body through our baptism into His death and resurrection, and through our faith in Jesus, as our Lord and Savior. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. The truth of the Christian life is grounded in the truth of Christ as a life lived with love, compassion and mercy, as God incarnate. Christianity is not a one or two day a week religious observance; it is a seven by twenty-four way of life. The Body of Christ is the living embodiment of the new covenant, a people made new by God's grace and the indwelling Holy Spirit. We are brothers and sisters of a new society, whose purpose and mission is to reconcile all people to God in Christ Jesus. Apparently, the last thing on the minds of the Corinthians was reconciliation. In their boasting, and identification with whoever's philosophy, teaching, or rhetoric they happen like, they have forgotten that belonging to Christ means that we cannot belong to anyone else.

The message applies equally to you and me today. In our diversity of political opinions and even socio-economic differences, we may find ourselves on opposite ends of a wide spectrum of thoughts, feelings and opinions concerning issues like social justice for migrant workers, healthcare reform, and sexuality. Later in 1 Corinthians (7:29-31) Paul reminds us that all earthly concerns are ephemeral, they are passing away, and since we are citizens of the Kingdom of God, we are to hold all things lightly, in the knowledge that there is only one Lord of our lives and the world. That is

Christ Jesus, who is Lord of all. To hold things lightly is to bring humility to the table, to understand that whatever our own convictions may be, there is always a bigger picture to consider, and a greater good to which God is directing us. It is a process of discernment, not a matter of ego, or opinion. Discernment means to seek God's will through a faithful separating apart of the Godly from the worldly, like distinguishing between the still small voice of the Holy Spirit and our own egos; being able to discern truth versus lies; good from evil; or essentially separating the wheat from the chaff. Discernment requires that we listen, look, speak, pray, and recognize the presence and direction of God in our lives, the life of our community of faith, and even the whole Body of Christ.

Even when we disagree, we are still called to unity as Christ's Body in the world. We are bound together in Christ for eternity. We all eat and drink of Christ's Body and Blood as sisters and brothers in Him. The Church is not a collection of factions or special interest groups. We are diverse people bound together by the love of God, with a common mission to share the Good News with a broken world. We are meant to deal with our differences in a spirit of caring compassion, and love. God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason. We should practice listening twice as much as speaking. It may even be hard to love other Christians who claim absolute and definitive knowledge of what the Bible does or doesn't say, what Scripture means in a variety of contexts, or who is or isn't acceptable to God. It may be hard, but we have to try. Simply hearing those examples aloud sounds ridiculous to me, as if any of us can fully comprehend the mystery of God. Or, as if anyone can be excluded from God's grace, when God only Son died so that **all** might be reconciled to Him. *All* being the operative word here. Paul's point then and now is that the cross of Christ expresses most fully the saving ways and power of God. The way of the cross is the ultimate gift of unconditional love, self-sacrifice, and humility for the life of the world. The way of the cross is paradoxically life affirming. We cannot let our own judgmentalism, prejudices and biases get in the way of life-giving communion with God in Christ or with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Indeed, as Paul asserts, "the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing."

Just as Christ's mission on earth is reconciliation, so is ours. Vietnamese monk, writer and activist, Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "The practice of peace and reconciliation is one of the most vital and artistic of human actions." Again, "The practice of peace and reconciliation is one of the most vital and artistic of human actions." He's right, because living into Jesus and His Godly characteristics transform us into even more beautiful, living, works of art. After all, God is Truth, Beauty, and Love. Getting our differences into right perspective is an art form in itself. You know how some issues can become huge in our own minds, mostly because we are in love with the idea of being right, when the truth is that God alone is right and just. So, we have to learn to accept that in the bigger picture that God is constantly creating, many of the things we become passionate about may well turn out to be of little consequence when proper perspective is applied. It takes humility, a willingness to listen, and the ability to say, "I can be wrong". Discernment is also the work of the artist, creating time and space for God to speak to our hearts, and then through our faith in action. We too can become brilliant artists of God's grace and compassion, God's love and justice, as we strive for unity in our diversity, proclaim Christ crucified, and walk humbly with our God.

Amen.