

Tongues of Men and Angels

There's a connection between I Corinthians 13, and Pentecost. We can start with current thinking on St Paul's model faith-community, which had to stay under the political radar in Roman-occupied Corinth. The Romans were averse to branches of the Jesus Movement spreading over the empire, particularly as the Movement had failed to die on Good Friday.

It is thought Paul advocated for a large food-bank cum counseling service, and there is support for this in older Bibles, which used the word 'charity' instead of the current word 'love'.

But the Corinthians had perhaps taken the events of Pentecost too literally; speaking in tongues was a skill elevated beyond and above the others that maintain a healthy and vibrant faith community. Paul is probably describing a class system among the Corinthians, where the speakers in tongues attained special status, and were leaving the washing-up, the baking, and the brass-cleaning, (let alone ministry to the poor) to second-class parishioners.

Hence the noisy musical metaphor, a sign of Paul's disapproval of loveless and self-centred sound .

It is no coincidence either that Chapter 12 (which was read at our Pentecost services) lists no fewer than 9 skills – all equal – that go to make up the spiritual component of the church's body. And that is just the spiritual aspect; the critical importance of charity is brought home firstly in Ch.12;28, where the Apostle specifically mentions 'healers, helpers, administrators' as well as in the next Chapter, where a loveless church is portrayed as nothing but sounding brass.

If we had a dollar for every faith community that fell out over its music, its worship format, its speaking in tongues, or its tendency to elevate certain skills over others, we could finish our earthquake strengthening tomorrow.

Not that Paul is warning about church music per se; his metaphor points to attention-seeking noise. He is writing about distraction.

It is the absence of love that disfigures and discredits churches, even those churches that give away all they possess.

The Pentecost event is a critical event in the birth of the church as we know it; but we elevate certain forms, gifts, and modes of worship at our peril, if we overlook love. We are only as strong as our pastoral care, and that is a gift we can and should all exercise, every day.