

To See in a Mirror Dimly 1 Corinthians 13:12 in Ecumenical Perspective

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For now we see in a mirror, dimly,
but then we will see face to face.
Now I know only in part; then I will know fully,
even as I have been fully known.¹

Life, our very existence, is enigmatic. Mysterious, unknowable, inscrutable, unfathomable, just to mention a few of the synonyms listed in my computer for the word 'enigma,' which origin is the Greek word *ainigma*. The NRSV translates it as "dimly": "For now we see in a mirror, dimly."² We "know only in part" (1 Cor 13:9, 12), and the knowledge we do think we own is, according to Paul, a perishable item, just as is prophesy (1 Cor 13:8).

To the surprise of many, this is a statement about *our* limited abilities, *our* inability to grasp reality. It is not about 'the others,' the 'outsiders' and their possible shortcomings in terms of knowledge and understanding. This is an absolute statement on the human condition, regardless of our religious belonging, and it includes us as Christians—indeed, it is addressed to us *as* Christians. So, why does Paul feel he needs to say this, what is his purpose? What did he want to achieve? What does the Spirit tell us today?

Diversity as Conflict among Christians

Followers of Jesus in Corinth, the people to whom Paul is writing, were divided among themselves, and we know that this was the case with other congregations too, both within congregations and between congregations, from earliest times. Sometimes, people seem to have a

¹ 1 Cor 13:12; New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

² According Louw and Nida's dictionary, *ainigma* refers to "that which is puzzling, that which is difficult to understand, puzzle, riddle. ... [T]he general usage of *ainigma* would seem to point to the meaning of *difficulty in understanding and comprehension* rather than in visual perception."

picture of Christian history, in which the first period was more like paradise than anything else, with unity and lack of discord. Then, later, things got complicated and conflicts arose. Partly, I suppose, Luke's description of the Jerusalem congregation in Acts 2:41-47 is responsible for that image; he describes unity and concord, and its positive effects on people outside the congregation. From other texts, however, including Paul's letters, we get a very different picture.

To the people in Corinth, Paul writes (1 Cor 1:10-13),

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

It seems humanity has always been the same, and that we Christians are not so very different; almost by default, we relate differently to the same phenomena, and we have a tendency to build separate identities as we do so. The words of Paul are painful to hear, not least for myself as a Lutheran pastor, especially when knowing that Luther, too, rejected strongly the idea that anyone should be calling themselves after his name.

It is perhaps a comfort to know that the first Christians were no different from us in this regard, and that we are still here after 2000 years. Thinking of all the strife in Christian history, one may even wonder how our survival has been possible at all – so much conflict, and still God cares about us enough to let us live and preach his word. I believe there is a secret to this, to which we shall return shortly, a way that God has provided for us through the maze of an enigmatic world. But first a few words on diversity and knowledge.

Diversity, Knowledge, and Love

It seems to me that conflict among Christian denominations is often based on claims of knowledge, or revelation, or prophesy, which reveal truths worth breaking up communities for, worth going separate ways in isolation from each other. There is a sense of 'we-know-more-than-the-others,' and we let that knowledge, those convictions, control our community building.

There is nothing wrong in having strong convictions, to be sure. Paul himself had very strong convictions. The problems begin to surface when we think of knowledge, or revelation or prophesy, as *the basis* of our relationship with each other and with God, the very thing that makes or breaks a relationship. It is a very different thing to be strong in ones convictions on the one hand, and letting those convictions control community relationships on the other.

Knowledge, however, can never be such a foundation for our relationship to others and to God, neither can prophesy. *This is because knowledge and prophecy are perishable items that are meant for other things, other functions.* Paul is quite clear in our text both that we know only in part and that knowledge shall perish (1 Cor 13:8-10), as shall prophesy. From this it follows that

we cannot build identities on things that shall vanish without risking vanishing with them. We should build, as Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel, on the rock, so that our house will stand when the storm comes (Matt 7:24-27). We should not put too much trust in that which we only know in part.

In our enigmatic world, there is only one thing that is eternal, and Paul puts a name on it: love. "Love never ends" (1 Cor 13:8). We need to build on that which is with God eternally, that which is God: love (1 John 4:7-8, 12). Love, Paul says, "does not insist on its own way" (1 Cor 13:5), it unites through humility and readiness to listen.

Love is with God, is God, from the beginning; love is what inspires trust and hope, love is alpha and omega, incorporating us into Christ, keeping us for eternity. All love comes from God and returns to God. All trust emerges from love, and hope is inspired by love. Therefore, everything we build with love on earth bears the mark of eternity and will never perish. One day, Paul says, we shall know fully, as we are known fully by God now. And to be known fully by God is to exist in God's love.

If God loved us first, and by his love established a way for our trust in God and our hope (the three things Paul says are abiding), then that trust and hope require us to love one another. The connection is so strong that John's first letter states that if we do not love one another, we prove that we have no trust or hope in the love God inspired – 'in-spirited' – in us (1 John 4:19-21).

If this is true, what about difference and diversity? Is diversity and difference, if it builds on the fact of our fragmentary knowledge, by necessity part of the dark, part of what destroys and tears down what God wants to build? I don't think so, and I don't think that is the message of the Bible. On the contrary, difference may be seen as a special gate to the Kingdom, God's pedagogical tool to make us see beyond what we think we know.

Diversity and Difference as God's Pedagogy

Our differences are perishable, just as our knowledge is fragmentary and perishable. We see dimly, and differently, and cannot fathom the fullness. But if we do not build our identities, our individual and community identities, exclusively on what marks us as different and unique, difference, both *within* and *between* and *beyond* our Christian denominations will receive a positive place in our lives and train us for the Kingdom.

It is easy to love those who are like us; it is easy, as Jesus says in Matthew's 5th chapter, to love those who love us. Even "tax collectors" and "gentiles" do that... Real respect for difference, based on our awareness of the enigmatic nature of the world, as we know it, may lead us to humility and love for those who do not think like we do. Difference, then, becomes God's pedagogy, used to mould us in his likeness, he who,

makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (Matt 5:45)

When we see difference, therefore, we should always be reminded of our own limited and fragmentary knowledge and approach the ‘other’ with a mind immersed with that which is eternal, that which shall never perish: love, trust, and hope. This does not mean that we need to give up our own convictions, or that which marks us as different. Indeed, even the New Testament itself with its four Gospels canonises difference, which it needs to convey the fact that ‘truth’ is not a mathematical formula, but something dynamic, which needs to be lived.

Instead, we use that difference to get closer to God. When we love in the midst of the enigmatic, the unknowable, we have found the way to life, a way superior and more excellent than all other ways. *There is no path to a goal – the goal lies hidden within the path.* Our ecumenical conversations thus turn into a celebration, a realisation of God’s pedagogy. God is not only the goal of our lives; God is the way to our lives.

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians thus indicates to us that truth can never be separated from love: God is truth, and love is eternal. Knowledge, which we have only in part, is of a different order. Truth is more practical than theoretical: truth goes together with concepts like justice, righteousness. Note how Paul combines “wrongdoing” and “truth” when he explains love in 13:6: Love, “does not rejoice in *wrongdoing*, but rejoices in the *truth*.” Truth is the opposite of wrongdoing rather than the opposite of any theoretical statement on the nature of God or the world. In this way, knowledge has little to do with truth, if it is not infused with love. Claiming justice is claiming truth; speaking truth means speaking love.

I believe, then, that just as the Bible canonises diversity, we should honour our respective traditions, our differences, our diversity, knowing that diversity has been part of Christianity since day one. And let God use them as a tool to get us closer to him. When we let our differences work in this way (but not before), we can be a witness to Christ in this world. Ecumenism has, therefore, both an inward direction, and an outward; it is a form of centripetal mission.

4. Unity in Diversity as Mission

Not only do we see that truth needs four versions in the New Testament Gospels to guard against the sin of fundamentalism, understood as belief in human ownership of revelation. We also see within each Gospel how diversity is accommodated. In John 14:2, we hear of God’s house having many dwellings, and Jesus also speaks of “other sheep” that belong to another fold that he must gather together (John 10:16).

When we learn how to handle difference, recognising the foundational enigmatic nature of our existence with God, we are being trained for the Kingdom and we shall be witnesses for others. As Jesus says in John 13:34-35,

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*

If we love one another in the midst of difference and diversity we shall be recognised by others as Christ's disciples. There will be, so to speak, a centripetal movement, as we find our way to each other as Christians. By implication, if we cannot do this we shall not be recognised as Christ's own, and therefore shall not be able to bear witness of him, nor of God's love for the world (John 3:16).

Mission, then, is very much linked with ecumenism but not mission as it is often understood, as an exclusively outward activity. Being the light of the world, the salt of the earth (Matt 5:13-14), is about attracting attention by one's attitudes, actions, and love. It is a centripetal force, not a centrifugal. Therefore, without ecumenism we could hardly be credible witnesses.

Understanding mission in a world in which our understanding is only partial and fragmentary, requires, I believe, dedication to justice, to love, to trust and hope, i.e., that which is true in the real, or biblical, sense of that word.

This is, I believe, a Pauline message for our time and, perhaps particularly, for this region.