

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

22 January 2022

Isaiah 9.1-4

3 of Epiphany

1 Corinthians 1.10-18

Rev. Alan Keeler

Matthew 4.12-23

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

We are within what is called the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. There is a deep belief that all Christians are one in Christ. But there is a clear experience that people will express this in a variety of ways. Strictly we believe there is only one Church. This is because whoever we are, our relationship with God is through the person of Jesus Christ. As such the various denominations consider themselves to be sort of cousins and we ought to get on better.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is a time to express what we share in our different denominations and build better relationships with each other. As much as it is called a week it is 8 days and each year is between the 18th and the 25th of January. To promote this there is an organisation called Churches Together in England and St Marys is part of a local group called Churches Together in Central Bromley. On one Sunday in the week of prayer we will have a pulpit swap and a joint service. This is this Sunday but sadly there haven't been enough preachers to go around and so you have got me today!

If you are keen for some worship expressing wider denominational life please come to the joint service at 6:30 this evening at Saint John's Park Road. This morning I'm aiming to share some thoughts about what Christian unity means.

Ecumenism

It has been said that the Church of England is inherently ecumenical within its own life. The experience of the Reformation of the 16th century was very painful. There were strong views, sometimes violently expressed about whether to remain Roman Catholic or to become Protestant. The Church of England found a settlement where we seek to be both. The long history of working at our own unity and respecting variety gives us resources to work patiently with all people who are Christian.

Christians working out who they are, goes back to the New Testament and the early centuries of the faith. In particular there was the question of how

we understand the person of Jesus Christ. Christians knew that through Jesus Christ God had done something new. Through Jesus Christ all people are offered God's love and the forgiveness of sin. So Jesus is a very special person. But how special? Was he particularly gifted? Was he especially close to God? Or was he in fact as divine as the creator? It is this last option the church chose. We call this understanding of God the Trinity and it remains the authentic Christian understanding of God.

Sadly as time has gone on the church has become divided. There was the great system of the 11th century where the churches of the East and West divided. This produced the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. In the 16th century the church failed to reform itself and split between those who remained with the Church of Rome and those who formed a variety of new denominations such as Lutheran, Calvinist, Anabaptist and Church of England. In England as time passed there were further divisions as people wanted more vigour in their faith and freedom from the Church of England. So there were then the nonconformist denominations of Methodist, Congregational and Presbyterian. In the 20th century there have been many people wanting to express a more enthusiastic and Pentecostal style of worship which has generated even more congregations.

God's big plan

You could say all of this describes a great deal of growth in the Christian Church despite as it were the family now having a wide range of homes. The message of Jesus Christ and his influence on the world has become immense. This global ambition had always been God's plan.

We had a reading from the Old Testament. the prophet Isaiah Refers to:

The land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

It is an example of the Old Testament writers pressing against the boundaries of the Jewish nation to say that God has got even bigger things he wishes to do. The Jewish prophet Isaiah sees God seeking to bring light to the Gentiles, non-Jews. We will be familiar for instance from our Christmas service of Nine Lessons and Carols how the Old Testament is preparing the way for Jesus Christ.

Within the Old Testament life with God was expressed with The Covenant. This is the agreement between the creator God and the Hebrew people beginning with Abraham, freed from Egypt under Moses and being given the promised land. The prophets later saw this as the beginning, for God wanted to include all people.

This new work of God happened through Jesus' death and resurrection. Saint Paul in particular leads us to understand how God breaks down whatever barriers there are between people and himself. There is the barrier of sin and through Jesus' death there is forgiveness. There is a barrier of death and through Jesus' resurrection there is eternal life. St Paul sees sin and death as the general human condition. Jesus has brought a general human solution. Paul says in his letter to the Galatians

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3.28

So the great work of God is a desire for his life to be known by all people. There is an openness, embrace, inclusion.

Paul's struggle

This morning we heard St. Paul talking about the need for unity within the church in Corinth. Even in these early days of Christianity, groups of people were vying against each other. They gathered around inspirational leaders someone called Apollos. Paul mentions Cephas which is St. Peter. Some people even tried to draw Paul in to their side and be their figurehead.

Paul rises above this and wants to draw all people to Jesus Christ so they find their unity in him. Jesus Christ is the head of the church however inspirational some of his earthly followers might be.

Jesus' welcome

We had a reading from Matthews gospel that included quoting that passage from Isaiah as well. Jesus has this way of including people.

we heard about Jesus choosing his disciples. the passage only includes a few fishermen. Jesus goes on to choose a very varied selection of people to follow him. his disciples included tax collectors who many would have considered traitors to the nation. he included people described as zealots who would have been actively fighting against the

Romans. within his closest followers there is huge potential for disagreement. it is as if Jesus is deliberately seeking to emphasise overcoming differences.

in his ministry again Jesus cares for people who are very different. There is a Syrophenician woman clearly a gentile. There is a Roman centurion, part of the oppressive empire. And of course there are people whose lives good religious people would look down on. But Jesus says A doctor does not go to people who are well.

At the end of his ministry Matthew records Jesus giving the Great Commission 'go and make disciples of all nations'.

Church unity

I have tried to give a very big picture of the way that God wishes to work with the whole of humanity and welcome us all into his Kingdom. It is God's character to breakdown barriers and give respect to people.

It is human nature to want something familiar. something tidy and if necessary exclude the people who are different or demanding. I used the image of the church being like a family with many cousins. There are no differences more painful than those with whom we are very close to.

God shows his desire to bring about reconciliation between people through the death of Jesus. It isn't going to be easy. We will find ourselves put out or even taken advantage of. But Jesus died to show the love of God to the whole world.

First of all we are invited to receive this love of God for ourselves. This is to be the heart of our life as Christians and members of a church. It is out of that love that we will find the motive and the power to build relationships and persevere with one another, with other churches, with people who may not be like us, with practises that might be quite unfamiliar.

Dare I say it that this is God's vision of heaven. The greatest invitation ever given. A love that is made available to all.