

Epiphany 4 – Christian Unity

Nehemiah 8 vv 1-10, 1 Corinthians 12 vv 12-31, Luke 4 vv 14-21.

I nearly forgot that this was the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Years ago, unity week was a major event in our church calendars. Different churches swapped pastors, priests and preachers. We held special united services or acts of witness or study groups, but, like so many things in contemporary church life, Christian Unity Week has grown cold.

This is partly a measure of our relative weakness. There are not too many churches in Cuxton and Halling now and those of us who are left are too stretched to get involved in united events with other churches. Some people would say that we should not see united services and activities as an extra – putting more strain on our already scant resources – but something that we do together, instead of what we currently do apart, thus reducing the burden that each of us has to bear and doing something better with our pooled resources than any of us can do alone. There are, however, reasons why all of us do not want to give up what we already do, reasons why we do not want other people to have too much say in organising our activities. Whether our reasons for holding back are good ones or bad ones is something that we have to ask ourselves.

When we used to have big Christian unity services at this time of year, the text for the sermon was very often from John 17 v11 –*that they may be one*. This is from the high priestly prayer of Jesus and *that they may be one* has become a slogan of the ecumenical movement. [*Ecumenical*, incidentally, means “world-wide.” The ecumenical movement works for the unity of the world-wide Church.] Christian unity obviously matters to Jesus. He prayed to His Father for our unity on the very night before He died, the same night on which He washed His disciples’ feet and the same night on which He instituted the Holy Communion, not only a memorial of His death, but a proclamation that He will return, a symbol and an effectual sign of His eternal communion with us and our eternal communion with one another. What He achieved on Good Friday by His Cross was Atonement – that human beings should be at one with God, and, if at one with the one true God, then at one with one another. His prayer at the Last Supper is the prayer of our great High Priest consecrating Himself as a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the whole world and consecrating His Church to be a kingdom of priests, men and women who offer their own souls and bodies as a living sacrifice in Him and with Him and through Him in the unity of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God the Father.

One reason the ecumenical movement has lost its buzz is its success. We hardly remember now how far apart the churches were even a few decades ago. There was a time when Catholics and Protestants did not say the Lord’s Prayer together because, while they might use the same words, they might not mean the same thing by them. Other churches seemed a bit odd and some of us doubted whether others of us were even proper Christians at all. All those united services, combined acts of witness and shared social events have broken down these suspicions and their attendant distrust. We do not doubt that members of other churches are Christians as much as we are.

Our denominations have held meetings and ongoing talks about doctrinal differences and considerable progress has been made. There has been a good deal of agreement between the

churches regarding long standing of differences of interpretation and, even where there is not yet complete agreement, there is a lot more understanding than there used to be of one another's positions and a willingness to debate as friends, even as part of the same family, rather than to hurl abuse and accuse of heresy.

These changes are good, though sometimes I suspect that they indicate, less a recognition that good, sincere people may hold apparently contradictory opinions about important issues, than a feeling that theological points are not really all that important. Now, if we accept that *Theology is faith seeking understanding*, then theological points are very important indeed, but, because Christian faith is inseparable from Christian love, no sincere seeking after faith should lead to animosity against those who reach different conclusions from ours.

There is an old joke about a great big ecumenical event at which all the churches in a particular town come together for the first time ever. They have a wonderful time of fellowship together and one lady says to her priest, "You know, Vicar, we're all serving the same God in our own way, aren't we?" And the vicar says, "Well, yes; they're serving God in their way and we're serving Him in His."

I think we would all recognise that that vicar was both arrogant and wrong to think that we have the whole truth and that other people only have their opinions. Too many of us, however, would agree with his parishioner only too complacently that all the churches are serving God in their own way and leave it at that. We are not supposed to be worshipping God and doing His work in our own way. We are supposed to be worshipping Him and working for Him in His way. We need to be humble enough to recognise that we do not always get it right and humble enough to recognise that other people and other churches may well get it right when we get it wrong. But we (and members of other churches) are not called to do things our way. We are called to do things God's Way.

And how do we know what God's Way is? We ask Him. We approach Him prayerfully. We study the Scriptures prayerfully. We enjoy His presence in Holy Communion, Christian fellowship and personal meditation. We take into account what He has revealed to the Church in the past, not only to our denomination and tradition, but also to other Christians as well. We look at the world around us and prayerfully try to discern present signs of the Kingdom of God. If we are Christians, we do not want to do things our way; we humbly seek to do things Christ's way.

That they may be one. The ecumenical movement in this country has tended to concentrate on bringing together the different denominations of Christ's Church. That is certainly a worthwhile aim, but it cannot be the main sense of Christ's prayer at His Last Supper. When Jesus prayed *that they may be one*, there were no Methodists or Anglicans. There was no Salvation Army, no Baptists or Pentecostals. No-one had yet thought about Presbyterians or Episcopalians. The words "Catholic" and "Orthodox" had not yet been applied to the Church and certainly did not have the sense they would acquire centuries later.

That they may be one was certainly Christ's prayer for His Church, but, at that time, He had very few followers and they were represented by the twelve apostles one of whom would go

out from that very meal to betray Him. *That they may be one* was Christ's prayer, but it was not directly related to the question of how we in the Church of England might work and worship with the Baptists and Methodists nearly 2,000 years after it was uttered.

In the New Testament, the Church would certainly be in danger of division – in some ways similar to ours, in many ways different. Individuals within the early Church sometimes fell out with one another and refused to be reconciled. Some early Christians became too attached to particular ministers rather than to Christ. There were disputes between the traditionalists around James and Paul's more radical followers. There were arguments about the place of charismatic gifts and the reality of the resurrection, puzzlement about the end of the world, disagreements about morality, theological arguments, disagreements about the missionary enterprise. There were also divisions of race and between rich and poor. All these divisions amounted to a failure on the part of the New Testament Church to live up to what she was called to be – the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the Bride of Christ, the Vine, the Communion of Saints. Division was a failure to co-operate with the grace God gives in response to His Son's prayer *That they may be one*.

The prayer *That they may be one* is about something much more fundamental than any of these mundane causes of division within the Church. *That they may be one* is about the very essence of what it means to be a Christian. We need to move on to John 17 v21 where Jesus is still praying *That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me*.

What Jesus is asking the Father is that His friends – the apostles and all the millions of people who would come to faith in Christ through the apostles' testimony – would share in the unity of the Trinity. God is one. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one. When a person puts his faith in Christ and is baptised in His Name, Christ comes to dwell in that man and that man dwells in Christ. Christians are one with God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Given that we are one with Christ, we must be one with each other. All that divides us from God is sin. All that divides us from one another is sin. Christ has washed away our sins. He has atoned for us so that we are one with God and one with one another. Disunity with fellow Christians, falling away from God, these are a reproach to the Christ Whose Blood was shed for our atonement. His Death on the Cross sealed God's covenant with humanity. In Baptism we were included in that covenant. That covenant is renewed each time we participate in Holy Communion, - communion with God, communion with all Christian people, one in the Spirit, one in the Body, one with each other, the Church of God.

And all this is for a purpose. John 17 v18. Jesus says to the Father, *As thou has sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world*.

If God anointed Jesus to preach the Gospel to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised and to preach the acceptable year of the Lord, what do you suppose it means to say that you and I are the Body of Christ?