

SERMON FOR SUNDAY 22 JANUARY 2017

The theme of my sermon today is unity. I have chosen this theme as we are now in the middle of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity which seeks to reconcile the pain of deep divisions affecting the unity of the church, following the many divisions in the history of the church.

In a recent edition of the Church Times, I read that the Archbishop of Canterbury had affirmed that in spite of divisions left by the Brexit campaign, reconciliation of the differences that divide us is possible if we look at our roots, our culture and our history in the church tradition. This is because the gift, command and promise of Jesus Christ is for us to live well together despite our differences and offer hospitality to the stranger and those in exile.

However, this gift, command and promise is, I believe, undermined if there is a lack of unity amongst Christians themselves. I feel that as we confront all the fears and uncertainties in today's world, there is an urgent need in our diversity of worship to find common ground amongst us as Christians. At St. Mellitus College, where I am currently in training to be a Licensed Lay Minister, I can see evidence that this common ground is achievable as once a week we all unite in good heart and one

faith in a variety of forms of Christian worship. With this in mind, at the induction session, the Bishop of Kensington said that when trainees at St. Mellitus go out into the world this will be of great value in counteracting any post-Brexit divisions.

Returning to the quest for unity of the Week of Prayer. This quest, has an ancestry that goes right back to the letters of Paul and the Gospels. Thus, when Paul writes his first letter to the Corinthians, he reprimands them for quarrelling over who they belong to. Some say they belong to Paul, others to Apollos, or to Cephas or to Christ. Paul's response to this divisiveness is to tell the Corinthians that you cannot divide Christ and that by his name only they should be united in the same mind and purpose. This theme is echoed in the readings set for this week in the lectionary as it falls in the Week of Prayer as we read chapter 5 of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. In this chapter, Paul writes that the one Christ died for all so all can live for him who died. The key words here are 'one' and 'all' as these emphasise unity. In the subsequent verses 19 and 20 Paul's theme is reconciliation and I quote:

'that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us'. Paul goes on to urge the Corinthians on behalf of Christ to be reconciled to God.

Returning to the problem of quarrelling groups, Paul writes to the Corinthians that his mission is not to be a group figurehead but to preach the Gospel. It is in this preaching that we find a call for unity not relating this time to division amongst Christians but a unity that can be achieved by pushing the bounds of Israel outwards to include the Gentiles. In his letter to the Romans, Paul likens this unification to a wild olive shoot (the Gentiles) being grafted on to the root of an olive tree (the Jews). This mission to the Gentiles is also found in today's Gospel reading when Matthew sees the move of Jesus and his disciples to Capernaum as fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah that the Gentiles of Galilee will be converted to the Christian faith. Isaiah's prophecy is written as 'the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned'. In this Gospel reading we also find a unity of Old and New Testament in the reference back to the Old Testament prophecies of Isaiah.

We can find a further unity of Old Testament with the New if we look at the Covenantal union of God with his people which is an Old Testament theme taken up by the New Testament. This covenant originates in Genesis 17 with the summary promise 'I will be your God, and you shall be my people' and continues in the New Testament with Christ as the

mediator of the new Covenant, with the benefits of justification and sanctification. Then there is the Sacramental union of the Christian's incorporation into the body of Christ through baptism and the Christian's spiritual union with Christ with whom he who is joined 'is one spirit' (1 Corinthians 6:7).

In the past and present call for unity there is word that features many times and that is the word 'root'. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes about the inclusion of the Gentiles by quoting from Isaiah who prophesied that 'the root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope'. On the same topic there is Paul's reference to the root of an olive tree and in our present day the Archbishop of Canterbury speaks of relating reconciliation to an examination of our roots. We might conclude from this continuing reference to roots that the search for unity involves going back to basics. If we go back to basics that involves a journey back through time and I believe there is an advantage here in that we can see from history that there is nothing new in division and quarrels, attack and discrimination and they are not just fearful products of our present times. This may be of some consolation, particularly to those of all faiths who face onslaughts today. Also, we can observe from history that there has been a centuries-old effort to establish unity amongst all people. This

manifests itself today in this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity as it seeks unity with the theme of 'Reconciliation – the Love of Christ compels us'. As this effort is seen to continue we can continue to hope that Christian unity and better still world unity is an achievable goal.

AMEN