

Holy Trinity Pro-cathedral Brussels
Sermon for Sunday 22 January 2012
Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Malachi 3:23-24

Psalm 133

Ephesians 2:14-20

John 29:19-23

Unity on the job

Today's readings were produced by Christians in Poland. We are asked to relate them to our prayer for Christian unity.

The gospel reading gives us John's presentation of Jesus' appearance on that first Easter Day. He does it in a way that has had particular meaning for all disciples since.

Jesus appeared when the disciples met on the first day of the week. Then in fulfilment of the prophecy of John the Baptist, (1:33) he delivers the promised Holy Spirit to his disciples. And as he promised at the last supper, he gives his disciples his peace. Their fear turns to joy.

Most commentators believe that John was presenting the resurrection in this way in order to make it clear to the disciples of generations to come that they should expect the same experience in the same context. So I hope that you have come to church this morning, ready to meet the risen Christ.

Christ empowers the disciples with the Holy Spirit. Then he sends them out with a mission. *As the Father has sent me, he says, I am sending you.*

How, we must ask, did the Father send Jesus? John's answer is spread across his gospel. Let me summarise:

He was sent to speak God's word, (7:16) with authority, (3:23) testifying to the truth. (18:37) That truth is that God's love is such (3:16) that he will surrender himself in complete self-sacrifice, in Christ; by doing so, he will bring to his people true life in all its abundance.(3:21, 36 and 10:10). To enable them to enjoy this life, he will pour the Holy Spirit on them.(3:34,5)

Jesus was sent, not to judge, but to serve. (12:47) In sending Jesus, the Father has made it clear that he will not turn away any who come to him, but will hold firmly them. (6:37)

Jesus says, *as the Father sent me, so I send you.*

We, his church, are sent to testify to God's word; not to turn people away, not to judge, but to serve; prepared to give of ourselves in order that God's human creatures might come to know life in all its riches.

That is quite a challenge.

But the church is empowered to meet that challenge through the gift of the Holy Spirit: God is with us in that task at every moment.

Then Jesus adds: *If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.* (20:23)

Does this mean that the church has the right to withhold God's forgiveness?

I think not, for Jesus said that those who come to him would never be turned away. This is an exhortation to get on with the task of mediating God's love to the world, so that people can be reconciled with God and enter into life in all its fullness.

The church's task is not to judge: people self-judge by their reaction to Christ.

Our **reading from Ephesians** warns us not to let differences within the church get in the way of this task.

Paul is speaking in terms that are different from John, but whose meaning is very similar. God makes us alive in Christ, bringing to believers "the hope of the riches of his glorious inheritance." All is by the gift of God. All that we must do is lay hold of it by faith.

Ephesians addresses a Christian church divided, because some have entered with the Jewish heritage; and some have not.

Remember, says Paul, Christ at great personal cost has destroyed the dividing wall between you. He has made peace within the church between groups who have different starting points. Peace is Christ's hard-won gift to us. We can enjoy that peace and use it: or we can break it.

Paul explains that peace in four word-pictures.

Whichever party we have come from, we are *fellow citizens*. The picture is of people who could come from many different ethnic or religious origins, but still be Roman citizens.

The next picture is more intimate. We are *members of the same household*. We live under the same roof. A household is happier where people show respect for each other. How scandalous if people start fighting within the household that is built on the apostles and has Christ as its corner stone.

Then that household grows into *a holy temple of the Lord*: the church is the place where God is to be found and its members should maintain peace in that temple.

And then we are ourselves are turned into a sort of temple within the temple. Are we living in a manner worthy of God's gracious decision to reside in us?

So what do we learn?

By joining in the meeting of the disciples on the first day of the week, you and I have put ourselves in the place where we should expect to meet with Christ, to be empowered for his work and to find life to the full.

But the business of the church outward looking. It is to bear the Christian message of God's love, his offer of forgiveness of sins and of a fulfilled life to all people.

Within the church, we are bound to have our disagreements. We have different backgrounds and different traditions. But it is a shame and a disgrace, if we let division, dissension and disunity undermine the essential work Jesus has given us.

Recently I was in a meeting where there was talk of whether it was possible to work ecumenically. A leading Jesuit who was present said "We can *only* work if we work together. The division of the church of Christ is a scandal."

I do not think that he meant that we should set aside all our own insights, our traditions or even our disagreements.

Nor do I think that he meant what we too often mean when we call for unity: that is, why do you not all stop being divisive and agree that I am right.

What he meant was that the work that is to be done is far too important for our bickering to be allowed to undermine it.

I was brought up in the **Presbyterian Church**. When I went to university in England, the brightest church nearby was **Anglican**. I met a girl who was Anglican too and since we moved to Brussels we have been enormously blessed in another lively Anglican church. Over a number of years I have studied theology in the **Catholic University** of Leuven, where the few Anglicans are greatly outnumbered by Roman priests, monks, nuns and lay people.

It has been a **privilege to know Christians from different traditions**, whose faith shines brightly. They have taught me so much. Indeed, I have often learned most by being open to people who do not understand every aspect of the Christian faith in the same way that I do. Learning from them does not mean that I agree with them. What matters is that we move nearer to Christ.

Christian unity is not about all Christians agreeing about everything.

We are often told by the press that our Anglican communion and the Church of England are torn asunder by disagreements. Now, as everyone knows, the Anglican church has for several years found it difficult to agree its approach to issues connected with homosexuality and the role of women in the church.

Those arguments make me happy to be an Anglican.

I recall being told as a young man that I should expect to have arguments with my wife, because in a marriage there are serious issues: and if you never argue, it is probably because you are not addressing the serious issues.

So it is with the church. For many years, the church was pretty confident that it knew its position on those major issues. Now it is not sure. I have opinions on both issues and so, I am sure, do most of you. But my opinion alone does not make the church's opinion. The truth is that as a church, we are struggling to find what our opinion should be. That involves argument and disagreement, but the argument is worthwhile because the issues are important.

Now the church of Rome is refusing to allow the discussion. On the Protestant side, all too often when there is disagreement, the church just splits.

Mature Christian behaviour should be able to have its arguments and still hold together. We poor old Anglicans, with all the muddle and confusion that we can manage, are debating and discussing. We sometimes struggle to respect each other's integrity. At times we get quite heated with each other.

But just as in marriage we should avoid throwing the porcelain at each other, or storming out the door, so in the church we should neither drive the other party out; nor walk out ourselves.

Paul himself was no stranger to very forcefully argument. So within the church we should be prepared to have serious arguments on the right topics.

But we should never forget to show respect to those who disagree with us. They are fellow citizens, members of the same household, those who form the building blocks of the temple where God is to be found. Christ made peace between us, at enormous personal cost. Who are we to spoil it?

Above all, we should **keep our eyes on the goal**, conducting our disagreements so that they do not get in the way of the mission with which the church is charged.

For the world desperately needs the Christian message. Many, many, people do not have life in abundance.

Humbly, without judging, our task is to minister the love of God to people. Remember what Jesus said: if we do not do it, it will not happen.

The task is ours: ours, **the whole church**. Unity is recognising our differences, debating them, but getting on with the job together. If we do not do it, it will not be done. How could we answer for that to our Master?