

Sermon January 2009, (Psalm 133 Acts 2:42-47 1Cor 12:12-31) Christian Unity

Acts Chapter 2 speaks of a wonderful church.
devoted to teaching, to sacrament, and to prayer.

And all who saw it were amazed
a church of togetherness
- they shared their wealth together
- they cared for their needs together
- they met and worshipped together in sincerity

And Luke adds, the Lord added to their number daily.

I love that picture, a picture of the early church, united, worshipping, working
together
sharing and caring and growing *together*

And sometimes when we look at our churches today
divided into squabbling denominations,
where we argue about everything:
doctrine, singing, clapping, kneeling,
it is tempting to think that if only we were united together, like the early church, how
much better things would be – how much more we might grow.

But the truth is that the early church was far from united.
Acts paints a rosy picture – but Paul's letters tell us that that was not always the case.
In fact some commentators suggest that Luke is guilty of a little bit of spin at times.

Elsewhere, the New Testament makes it clear that there never was such a thing as a
perfect church.

Read through the book of Corinthians. Chapter by chapter, verse by verse, you will
find that the church in Corinth was very divided.

They argued about who was the best leader to follow.
They argued about whether the best preachers were the ones who were most eloquent.
They argued about women and their place in the church.
They argued about how to celebrate communion.
They argued about whether to be involved with people of other religions or not.
They argued about theology.
They argued about life after death.
They argued about what church leaders should be paid.
They argued about church worship.
They sued one another in court.
They argued about marriage.
And they *even* argued about sex.

You know they were - totally unlike our churches today!

Galatians even tells us that at one point Peter and Paul had a total bust up at Antioch.
Paul calls Peter a 'hypocrite' he calls Barnabas a mug – and he pours down
anathemas on 'men sent by James'
before storming off from Antioch with the matter in dispute unresolved.

This is the week of prayer for Christian unity.

And boy, do we need prayer!

We aren't even united in our denominations – never mind across them! (Or is that

just Church of Scotland?)

Our unity looks more like a dream than a prayer.

And yet.

I believe that there is something going on:

a move of the Spirit – something that has for long been broken, beginning to come together again.

It's a new thing – the World Council of Churches traces back the history of denomination cooperation only for about a century: a very short time in the history of the church.

Would Scotland's sectarian problem exist today if they had had in the past the co-operation that we have today?

Of course, this movement of listening to each other, of working together, of sharing insights and resources is in part borne of necessity.

Every congregation, every denomination, realises that we are not as strong as we once were.

We cannot take our survival for granted.

We face common problems – secularisation – declining numbers – a hardening of the nation to the gospel.

And so we must pull resources, learn from each other – work together in mission.

The threats and problems we face can divide us.

We can take a perverse joy in difficulties of other churches.

"Our numbers are down – but not as much as theirs"

"they've got problems – good – maybe we'll pick up some dissatisfied members from them"

There a story of Tonto and the Lone Ranger

riding together through a canyon

and they find themselves surrounded by hostile Indians.

The Lone Ranger turns to his partner says "what are we going to do?"

But Tonto replies – "who's this WE, white man?"

Difficulties can drive us apart, or alternatively our common difficulties can also bring us together, cause us to circle the wagons and support each other.

The story is told of a priest, a vicar, and a minister who met together to share their problems and solutions.

And they found that all of their buildings were plagued by bats in the belfry.

The priest warned that he'd tried to shoot them with a shotgun – but that hadn't worked – as he'd ended up with holes in the roof.

The vicar said "we caught them – and being humane, we released them 50 miles away – but they just flew back"

The minister then said – well we solved our problem.

"Do tell" the others said.

"Well" said the minister "I simply baptised them – and we haven't seen them since"

We have something to learn from each other.

We are stronger when we work together – when we share ideas, insights and resources.

Whether it is the Reachout trust – Schools work

Whether it in Holy Week service – Landamer day outreach

Whether responding to Community needs together

(I should be able to think of a whole lot more – I can't – and that's not good)

We are stronger together – we are a better witness together – and we can learn and enrich each other from our experiences and traditions.

Even where we profoundly disagree.

I don't agree with the Baptist church in its rejection of infant Baptism – but I *can* learn from them something about the importance of Baptism to adult faith. We should celebrate our baptism – wear it as a sign of Christ in our lives.

I don't agree with Roman Catholics about lots of things.

But, last week I attended a requiem mass,
and learned so much that brought me joy.

The Holy water was sprinkled on the coffin.

Did you know what that's about? I didn't.

But the priest explained that the lady who had died was Christian – she Christian all her life.

And she was marked as child as Christ's by her baptism.

That had been the mark of her life – she'd lived as baptised person.

And now, in death, her baptism into Jesus still marked her as his. The sprinkling of the water marked the completion of all that was promised her baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus.

That's a fantastic thought.

Martin Luther – when he was tempted to doubt God's loves said:

“I have been baptised” I am his.

We can learn from Luther, learn from Catholics, so much about celebrating our common baptism.

I'm still content to be reformed – I still think this is the best articulation of a Biblical faith on offer – but others have important insights too.

And so we pray for Christian unity.

Not uniformity – not necessarily for forming one single denomination.

But pray for a unity of purpose, of Spirit, of vision, of mission.

But actually, in one sense, praying for Christian unity is a misnomer.

Because, in Christ, we are already united.

Paul writes

1Cor 12:27 “you are the body of Christ – and each one of you is a part of it”

And remember, those words are written to members of the most divided, fractious, squabbling, congregation that the New Testament knows – the Corinthians.

You are the body of Christ -

a unity not ultimately based on necessity

not based on the advantages for mission

not based on political correctness

not even based on the need to be loving -

but based on the fact of our union to Christ.

You are the body of Christ

and if you are joined to him, then you are joined to each other

to deny this fact – is to engage in an amputation that can only result in the death of that which is cut off.

That ‘Body of Christ’ to which we are joined is not the local church – although our involvement in that is crucial.

It is the world-wide, universal, Catholic Church of Jesus Christ.
Christ can only have one body.

If our union was only to the local church – to our congregation – if that was the extent of the Body of Christ.

Then Christ would have a body in Rutherglen URC
And another body in Stonelaw.
And another in St Collomkiles
And another in St. Mark's
And a body in Blairbeth

That is nonsense.

There is only one body to which we all belong.

And our unity in the body is in a sense **not** simply about aspiration – that we might choose to pray for it.

It is about **fact** – that we are called to celebrate and to manifest in our life together.

Maybe not “the week of prayer for Christian unity”
maybe then “the week of prayer **IN** Christian unity”?

Some will say that we need truth before unity.

That we must agree before we can co-operate.

The problem there is that what they are usually saying is that we must agree with me and my interpretation of truth before we can co-operate.

Paul, on the other hand, calls a divided, disagreeing, backsliding, morally compromised, church, to remember that it *is* that body of Christ.

That is not to betray Biblical truth – because that *is* Biblical truth.

When Paul fell out with Peter in Antioch – the issue was as crucial as it gets.

Paul was extending the gospel to the Gentiles in the freedom of grace.

Peter, and the Jerusalem church, appeared to be demanding that Gentiles obeyed some aspects of the Jewish law.

What did Paul do after the bust-up.

He spent time and effort going round the Gentile churches – collecting money to help the Jerusalem Christians as they faced famine:

a practical, loving demonstration of the unity of the Body of Christ even across crucial disagreements.

Not arguing for unity – just doing it in love

The common bond in Jesus – that union to each other which cannot be broken, triumphing over hot words, and histories of conflict.

The late David Watson once said something that got him into real trouble.

He said that the worse thing that had ever happen to the church was the Reformation.

Now for an evangelical Anglican – that sounded like heresy

But he wasn't calling into question protestant truths or the insights of Luther and Calvin

He was lamenting the fact that the Church, the body of Christ had fragmented, and one church – became two – and two became three – and three became six, and six became six hundred and still the number keeps growing.

And we look on the bright side, and we talk about celebrating the strength of our diversity.

But that is so much hogwash.

Because our denominations don't exist because the Christians said to themselves 'we need more diversity – and so let's sub-divide into another denomination!'

Denominations arose because one lot of decided that the rest were heretics – not fit to be in fellowship with – and so they shot off down the road – built another unnecessary building – and declared themselves now to be 'the true Church of Jesus Christ.'

But it is not only about denominations – because that is not the only thing dividing us now.

There is another curse in the church – and that is Congregationalism

Now, before you string me up – like folk wanted to string up David Watson – let me explain what I mean.

When I say congregationalism – I don't mean that system of government – that you know well.

That's not what I mean.

I'm talking about an attitude that pervades all denominations.

An attitude that says – our congregation is what matters.

The Kingdom of God stops at the doors of our church.

We can do it ourselves – we don't need them – we're the best.

In fact, if we can pull a few members from them, then that's even better.

And the Body of Christ – divided into 100s of denominations – divides again into millions of congregations

– and soon the congregations divide into factions

– and the factions into sad and solitary individuals.

And the Body of Christ – has become a pound of mince.

Division in the body of Christ – whether between denominations, or congregations, or factions is an affront to that union which Christ has established.

It should grieve us, just as it grieves the Holy Spirit – whom Paul calls the Spirit of Unity.

We are a body.

We need to start, feeling, acting, connecting as a body.

Refusing to be divided.

"If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honoured, every part is honoured with it"

I think one of the biggest challenges facing us as a church, is how do we put that into practice?

How at the lowest level – do we reject the individualisation – that sees congregation as a club there to serve my needs

and if it doesn't serve – well I'll find another.

And how at the larger level to we reject the congregationalism and parochialism – that always want to keep our focus only on that which affect the Christians that we know and we relate to- and stops allowing the body of Christ to be something bigger.

Let me suggest that it starts by praying for Christian unity -
by wanting Christian unity.

But it starts also, not by waiting for unity to happen, but by seizing hold of that unity

that we have in Christ,
and rejoicing and celebrating in it.

“You are the body of Christ – and each one of you is part of it”

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit - Amen