

“In this Together - A Call to Christian Unity [Week of Prayer for Christian Unity]

***A sermon for Third Sunday of Epiphany
otherwise known as The Conversion of Paul
[25th January 2015]***

BCP Collect:

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities stretch forth thy right hand to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. ***Amen.***

The Epistle is written in the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Galatians beginning at verse 11

THE EPISTLE

Galatians 1: 11-16a

¹¹For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin;

¹²for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

¹³You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it.

¹⁴I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.

8.30 BCP Mitford Communion

9.30 Hebron Communion

25th January 2015

¹⁵But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased
¹⁶to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles,

Here ended the Epistle

The Holy Gospel as written in the 19th chapter of the Gospel according to St Matthew beginning at the 27th verse ...

Glory to you, O Lord

St. Matthew 19: 27-end

²⁷Then Peter said [*to Jesus*] in reply, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?’

²⁸Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

²⁹And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.

³⁰But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

This is the gospel of the Lord.

Praise be to thee O Christ for this thy Holy Gospel

A Call to Christian Unity

Today the church celebrates the Conversion of St Paul;

and for the past 100 years *[or more]*

Christians of all denominations

have set aside this week

as a time of ecumenical prayer and engagement

in the hope of Christian Unity

.... that we might become as God intends for us

.... and be unified as the whole people of God

And if anyone should doubt God's intension

let me share with you these words;

*I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly **united** in mind and thought. [1 Corinthians 1]*

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare

God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. [Ephesians 4:11-13]

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. [Colossians 3:13-14]

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. [Galatians 3:26-28]

.... and if it occurs to you St Paul has monopolised UNITY

then the Psalmist had something to say on these matters as well;

*How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!
[Psalm 133:1]*

Oh and St John said

I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. [John 17:23]

Actually if I did nothing else *[this morning]* I could quite easily spend
the next hour *[or more]*
re-counting similar passages from scripture

and they all add up to saying the one-and-the-same thing;

.... it is ***that we are in this together!!***

and it shall be;

*“We are all God's children,
no more slaves or free”*

and by implication;

*no more Jew or Muslim or Christian or evangelical or
liberal*

*but unified as one
“in and through” Christ Jesus*

.... To BE the whole people of God;”

Shift;

And *[earlier this week]* as I started thinking
about some every day examples of 21st century Christian UNITY and
TOGETHERNESS and spiritual renewal
I'd imagined I would be spoilt for choice

Let me tell you

This week John Sentamu must have spent most of his waking hours
appeasing feminists and traditionalist over the subject of “Tainted
Bishops”

.... *[and]* Justin Welby *[got it in the neck]*
for *[ALEDGEDLY]* putting more effort into promoting
the social thinking of the extreme left *[of centre]*
than trying to fulfil the Churches fundamental mission
of spreading the Good News to every corner of the country.

Did someone say something about this being
a ***week of Prayer for Christian Unity??***

Far-be-it for me to go anywhere near those particular discussions
but if anything;

I think they've a whole lot more to say *[to us]* about
our nature to lay the blame for all that ails the world
[and the Christian community]
at the feet of those who happen to think differently than we do

All too often we take sides;

.... and we *[only we]* have the ***ANSWERS!!***

.... *we know what's RIGHT!*

.... *what's BEST!*

....and it's *THEM* and it's *US*!

Pause;

Lest - we - forget

Disunity – discord – divergence is the inevitable way to conflict
we see it in world politics
we see it within communities
between religions
and *[as I've just mentioned]*
it happens within churches and Christian families

This is not the way it was meant to be!!;

Didn't Jesus *[and all the writers I've just mentioned]*
our emphasise should be all about being;

... healers - not a dividers
.... seekers of civility - not conflict
.... menders – not a segregators
.... reconcilers – not a blamers

Move;

I suppose in all of this
our ace *“get-out of jail”* clause
might be to say;

“.... the world’s a totally different place now
.... how can we compare the world – *[as it is now]*
to what was going on two thousand years ago??”

Well actually - on the things I’ve just mentioned
[this disharmony and disorder and disunity stuff]
human nature dictates
there’s probably not a whole lot of difference between
“then and now”

If we take *Paul [who we know had an awful lot to say on this subject]*

[If we take Paul] it is to know that Corinth was the meeting point of
many nationalities
and this was reflected in the church Paul had established there.

This is how the Church was in his day;

.... there were some Jews
.... but far more Gentiles

they ranged from slaves at one end of the spectrum
.... to Erastus the city treasurer at the other.

Many were converts from a pagan background.

There were those who wanted to follow Paul [*and his radical
Gentile approach*];

.... and others who wanted to align with Cephas –
.... more in the Jewish tradition

Then [*of course*] there was Apollos

Apollos the well educated
.... the well groomed
.... the well spoken
.... the eloquent Apollos and he had his own dedicated band of
followers.

There's no doubt it must have been an extreme test of Paul's
leadership to keep that lot together!

[So Sentamu and Justin take heart!]

After all [*and this is just off the top of my head*]

these days you've only got to deal with:

Roman Catholics
Eastern Orthodox
Oriental Orthodox
Methodists
Lutherans
Pentecostals
Presbyterians

Assemblies of God
United Reformed

.... Anglicans
.... and as for Anglicans
might they be;

Low Church
Broad Church
High Church
Anglo Catholics
Anglo Orthodox
Charismatic
Quadrilaterals
Conservative Evangelicals
Liberal Evangelicals

***[and someday it's going to dawn on Joanna
... that she has most of them here in Mitford and Hebron!!]***

Move:

Let me say again;

This Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is a specific reminder to all
Christians;

.... that the Christian community ***is one in Christ.***

[....To BE the whole people of God]

Remember Paul said this:

1:9 God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is the ideal by which the universal Christian community strives for and

*prays for
particularly today [and for the rest of this week]*

That the Christian community here and around the world,
lives its faith in the shadow of the cross and
in the hope of the resurrection.

That the Christian community proclaims hope in the face of
despair;
.... working for peace in the face of violence;
.... educating our children,
.... and the children of our neighbours,
.... promoting mutual respect in the face of extremism;

That Christians bring a gift of healing to the sick and the
injured
in the face of apathy and neglect;

That Christians work to build bridges for relationships
in places such as ***Paris*** and ***Palestine*** and
in all the places that divide and distract the world from
the truth.

Pause

The Christian community -
the Body of Christ,
of which we are a part,
is a gift from God to a world;

.... [*a world so often*] consumed by violence;

.... riven by economic exploitation,
.... infested by self-serving political corruption
and tortured by human misery

The realities of a fallen humanity throughout God's creation are there
to see around us;

.... and all humanity has fallen short of the glory of God,
in whose image we are all made.

and yet- ***we are not without hope!!***

The Christian community are the hands and feet of Christ
working to build up a future full of hope and faithfulness for all of
God's people –
.... We may be broken,
.... we may be weak,
.... we may be less than what God desires,

.... but we are **one in Christ** who redeems us from our brokenness and our weakness.

We are **one in Christ** as we speak for those who have no voice;

.... we provide the compassionate witness
.... of love for our neighbours rooted in our faith in the Risen Christ.

We know the cross of self-sacrifice and;

.... we know the mystery and joy of the empty tomb
.... which gives us the courage to move forward in the face of all of these challenges.

Move;

You and I share a great responsibility [*and strength*] here in this tiny rural parish;

.... and in our schools
.... and places of work
.... and in our communities.

It is a responsibility that calls us to promote a common identity;

.... not as Greek, Armenian, Syrian, Coptic or Ethiopian Orthodox,
.... not as Latin, Greek or Syrian Catholic,
.... not as Maronite, Lutheran or Anglican,

but as Christians- in-fellowship!

.... as **healers** *[not dividers]* –

.... bearing witness to the resurrection faith

.... which overcomes roadside bombs – security walls and
deception and the hail of bullets.

.... as **seekers** of civility *[not conflict]* –

.... bearing witness to the

resurrection faith which overcomes despair
and gives hope to the world.

.... as **reconcilers** *[not blamers]* –

bearing witness to the resurrection;

.... in unity

.... and in partnership

.... and in community

.... as brothers and sisters in Christ.

*May our fellowship and our community with one another be
strengthened through this week of prayer and praise.*

“We are so Blessed” in so many different ways”

*May God continue to bless us - one and all
with renewed faith that sets aside all our differences.*

*May our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ grant us the courage
to love and serve in his Holy Name*

*with joy in our hearts
and hope on our lips.*

Remember again;

.... We are in this together

.... Unified as one “in and through” Christ Jesus

.... WE ARE THE WHOLE PEOPLE OF GOD”

In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen

Intercessions

With faith we pray to God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit

We pray for our neighbours, especially for Christian communities, our churches and ecumenical groups, for those who come together and for those who ignore each other.

Forgive us when we are indifferent or express disapproval, and bring your healing to the wounds that divide us.

We pray for those absent from our gathering today; that you may bless them on their own journeys of faith. We pray that we may find each other and share the journey together.

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We pray for our spiritual leaders, for all those who, inspired by you, have supported our worship and our service to others We pray for all who bear the responsibility of authority, for ministers, priests, bishops, that the one Spirit may enlighten them and grant them grace to work in harmony, joy and love.

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We pray for everyone who searches for truth, who understands and communicates our responsibility for the great ethical challenges of our century.

We pray, Lord, that we might each learn how to play our own part in mitigating the global and ecological disasters which threaten your creation.

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We pray for all the nations and communities, that those who are divided may seek peace and learn to live in safety and tranquillity.

We pray especially for the people of Korea, north and south and North Africa and Syria and Ukraine and Palestine in thankfulness, for

Christians who hearing your words have come together to work for justice and the common good.

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We give thanks, Lord, for those who, alone or together, follow your example of forgiveness, compassion and service to neighbour. May their gifts and their generosity inspire our own desire to give and to serve.

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We remember this morning those who are sick, sad or lonely and those who are brave and patient when things are going wrong. We pray that they may be aware of your comforting presence and know that in your hands they are safe and loved.

We remember

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

Lord we pray for all whose life is saddened by the death of a loved one, be with them in their loneliness and let them know that Jesus Christ is the light of the world a light which no darkness can quench.

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Merciful Father accept these prayers for the sake of you Son our Saviour Jesus Christ

Amen