**Sermon: United in the love of God**

Readings:

1 Corinthians 6:1-11 (NRSV)

John 14:23-29 (MSG)

I can often find myself wondering what the first century Jesus would make of the modern world and especially, what he would make of His Church. There are certainly many positive things that he might observe as a faithful reflection of his instructions to his disciples, those who were to form the first church. The Church has spread to every corner of the world and billions of people have been baptised into the faith; it has embraced all nations and many amazing changes have been made possible by those who courageously lived and preached the ways of love that Jesus placed at the heart of His ministry. There is a fulfilment, at least in part, of many of Jesus’ commandments, but certainly not all.

One of the things that I think Jesus would and does struggle with the most in his Church is the division that, sadly, we see all too much of. We have tens of thousands of denominations in the world – different branches of the church all formed because there is something that they reject in other churches. Beliefs about the divinity of Jesus, about the Holy Trinity, about what happens at Communion, about what priests should wear, their gender, their lifestyle, about our attitudes to other races, nations, sexualities, faiths…all these things have combined to create barriers and squabbles and even wars.

Now, this is nothing new. The early church was beset with division from the very start. As George mentioned last week, there was much disagreement about whether or not to admit gentiles (non-Jews) and whether the laws of the Hebrews should be adopted by new members of the church – should they be circumcised, should the food laws be observed etc. And in the reading we heard from Corinthians, we find Christians living just a few years after the resurrection in a state of turmoil - living in ways unacceptable to the teachings of the Church and taking each other to pagan courts over their differences, rather than forgiving and trusting one another. This is a long way from the words of departure that Jesus is leaving his disciples with in our Gospel reading - “I’m leaving you well and whole. That’s my parting gift to you. Peace.”

So why has there been so much division and so little wholeness in a movement that places love for both neighbours and enemies at the heart of its teachings? Well, there’s a pretty simple answer to that one and that is “because we’re human!” Pride, envy, greed, lust, ambition, arrogance – all these things and more get in the way of unity and too often, present a very unattractive image of the church to the world at large.

Now that’s not to say that there haven’t been attempts to put aside differences and move closer together. There has been a long history of ecumenism from the attempts of Roman Emperors to get different regional churches to agree, through to the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948. In recent times, the Churches Together movement has had considerable success in bringing together local churches in productive dialogue and we, at Christ Church, have benefitted greatly from working and learning and praying alongside many of our neighbouring churches. There are certainly reasons to be hopeful about unity and yet, there are also far too many examples of Christians creating division and promoting teachings that speak of exclusion, rather than inclusion.

Now, I ought to say at this point, that there is nothing wrong with disagreeing with other Christians. On matters of faith that require us to make some sense of that which is eternal and beyond the limitations of this world, we are, by our very nature, always going to have a limited understanding. And, consequently, we will often arrive at conclusions that differ from other Christians. Yet, rather than asserting the superiority of our favoured positions, I strongly believe that our first instinct should be to listen to others in a spirit of humility.

We are HUMAN. And as a result, what God reveals to us will always be filtered through imperfection. We cannot ever claim to have had the last word on many specific matters of doctrine and must always guard against letting our personal preferences shape our understanding of the truth. Now that isn’t to say that there isn’t such a thing as truth, but rather that we human beings will never have a complete grasp of it due to our limited and fallen nature.

Of course, this also doesn’t mean that there are no Christians who claim to have the truth. In fact, we all have a degree of truth, it’s just that some claim to have more than others! As a Christian leader, you’ll be relieved to hear that I am very happy to assert that there is a God. And I am also convinced that He reveals His nature to us in Jesus, His love for us on the Cross and that there is very real power in the Gospels that can transform lives. I also believe that the Spirit works within us today, right now, making relationship with the God of all eternity and truth possible, even for us limited beings.

But I don’t know how He created the Heavens and Earth, I don’t know how the mechanisms of good and evil work, I don’t know how and why Jesus defeats sin and death or much about the comings and goings of the Spirit. I may have some theories and hunches, but that is all they are. Any attempt to enshrine them in something more substantial is overreaching my limited capacity as a human being.

Of course, there are many who would disagree with such assertions…which, again, is to be encouraged! For them, there is much more to be said and thousands of Bible verses to support the many truth claims that they assert are both self-evident and endorsed by God. Yet, again, to me this conviction fails to acknowledge that there are many different ways to both read the scriptures and to model truth.

Our first reading from Corinthians is a case in point. For many years this has been seen as an explicit condemnation of homosexuality, but a more in depth reading that takes consideration of the time in which it was written and the culture to which it was addressed, reveals verses that say a lot about the wrongfulness in using and abusing people, but very little, if anything, about romantic love. I certainly wouldn’t want to shut down the truth claims of others, but I do feel the need to speak openly and clearly about different ways of exploring the truth.

I have always said that I want us here at Christ Church to be a questioning community – to be people who love Jesus and are committed to following in his way, but who are keen to keep asking questions of scripture and tradition. Recently, I have had a number of encounters with those who present a different way, a much more closed and exclusive way, and I feel we’ve reached a point where it is right for us to talk about how we respond to such a position.

So what might we do? Well, one suggestion that has been put forward is for Christ Church to consider joining the Inclusive Church network - a national Christian organisation that clearly encourages openness, questioning and inclusion. Their mission statement is on the slip of paper that you have been given and asserts the following:

"We believe in inclusive Church - church which does not discriminate, on any level, on grounds of economic power, gender, mental health, physical ability, race or sexuality. We believe in Church which welcomes and serves all people in the name of Jesus Christ; which is scripturally faithful; which seeks to proclaim the Gospel afresh for each generation; and which, in the power of the Holy Spirit, allows all people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Jesus Christ."

This is a statement that seems to hold the unity of all peoples as paramount, yet obviously, joining a group that sets itself out as different from others is clearly something that could potentially create division. And that is something that we must consider very carefully. The Wirral, in particular, has many conservative evangelical churches that tend to take a more fixed view of truth and we would certainly be setting ourselves apart if we were to become an “Inclusive Church” in title as well as in practice. Nevertheless, I feel that this is what we are, and there may well be something healthy in adding a different, distinctive voice to regional discussions.

The PCC will be considering such matters as part of this year’s away day programme and I’d be very grateful for any thoughts that you might have about Christian unity and especially the proposal to join the Inclusive Church network.

These are not easy considerations and I’ve been very tested by questions of inclusion and unity of late, but whenever I feel a bit lost, I try to just bring the person of Jesus into the situation and return to that thought of how He would feel about the modern world and its church. I have no doubt that he would be found standing alongside those who feel excluded and marginalised, I have no doubt that he would be encouraging a spirit of humility to grow within his Church and I have no doubt that he calls each one of us to re-examine each day what it means to love our neighbour, such that His people, all His people, might be “well and whole” and live united in God’s peace. Amen