**Sermon: Love United**

Some of you will have already heard my favourite joke about Christian relationships – St Peter is guiding some of the latest arrivals around Heaven – “that’s where you get your harps”, “ambrosia is served at 6pm” etc. – when someone asks, “why is that area over there completely enclosed by a high wall?” “Ah”, says St Peter. “That’s for the Protestants…they like to think that they’re the only ones up here!”

Of course, we could easily substitute “Protestant” for any denomination, or any faith group come to that. In theory, we might recognise the importance of being “one in Christ”, but in reality, our idea of Christian unity often translates as “others joining us”, rather than “all joining in Christ”. Sadly, the history of the church does little to contradict this observation. As we all know, the church has often torn itself apart over its differences, with numerous wars being fought over “truth” claims that none of us are in a position to establish beyond doubt. There are now well over 20 thousand Christian denominations scattered around the globe, each one formed out of differences and disagreements between Christian brothers and sisters.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity was first established in 1908 as an attempt to bring the churches together and to honour Jesus’ prayer for the disciples at the last supper, that “they may be one so that the world may believe.” (John 17: 21) It centres around an obvious premise, that people are much more likely to want to know about the church if they can see Christians united in their faith, rather than at each other’s throats. This is a really important point and we must certainly take it seriously if we are to be effective in convincing others that a life of faith is worthy of their consideration.

This is not to say, however, that we can never disagree! I probably get more riled by fellow Christians than I do by atheists(!), but that is because I care deeply about the things they talk about. Images of American evangelicals praying alongside Donald Trump, the cries of radical liberals waiting to be outraged at every turn and fundamentalists seeking to shut down conversation about things that they claim to have the final word on, are all guaranteed to produce steam from my ears! And I’m sure, well actually, I’m certain, that I’m capable of having that effect on others too!

There will always be disagreement and, on some levels, that’s absolutely right– we shouldn’t be passive about occasions when our faith is used to justify torture, slavery, genocide – to name but a few crimes sanctified by a perverted view of our faith. (Yet, neither should we be so certain, so lacking in humility, that we fail to recognise that we are all fully capable of being blinded by conviction). No, our strive for unity is not so damaged by the fact that we disagree, but rather by the manner in which we respond to that disagreement.

The theme for this year’s Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is taken from this morning’s reading from John’s gospel – “Abide in my love and you shall bear much fruit”. This seems to be a very simple instruction, but it is deeply profound and absolutely central to establishing unity among us. Living in love is the key instruction – the love that we find in Christ and which Christ has placed in us. As we hear in verse 4 “Remain in me, as I also remain in you” and then in verse 9, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.” We are to allow Jesus to occupy our hearts, but also to seek to be a part of him in how we engage with one another.

Remaining in Jesus’s love means being quick to respond to anyone in need, quick to forgive and slow to condemn. It means being humble enough to recognise that we are not capable of working out everything for ourselves, nor are we able to have the last word on scripture or social ethics – just look at how the Pharisees and the early church failed to understand when they repeatedly placed religious dogma over compassion for others. We still regularly make these mistakes when we fail to acknowledge our own prejudices and shortcomings. Yet, if we are prepared to examine those doctrines and habits that we have perhaps held without question, if we can find it in ourselves to put people first and allow kindness and compassion to come before all else, then we really will start to understand what it is to bear fruit as followers of Jesus.

I’ve recently started to read the memoirs of the Oxford scientist and theologian, Alister McGrath, titled “Through a glass darkly”. He takes his title from the famous verse in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians to illustrate how his worldview has changed, perhaps even evolved, over the course of many years, but not to a point where everything has become crystal clear. This is not a Damascus Road type of book, but rather one that acknowledges that the scales are never altogether removed from our eyes as we work through a faith that inevitably counts doubt as a perpetual travelling companion.

McGrath outlines the dangers of becoming so rigid in our views that we cannot entertain the possibility of any new insight, or the suggestion that we might not have a complete answer and he goes on to describe how such intolerance can be found in all sorts of competing worldviews. Among scientists, political ideologists, Christians, Muslims, atheists and members of any other belief system, there are those who will always see “alternatives as enemies”.

Our hopes for Christian unity depend on us being willing to acknowledge that our particular denominational outlook or preferred brand of faith might not have a monopoly on the truth. Yet, that does not mean to say that there isn’t a truth to be grasped. If we really are to be wholly united in our faith, if we are to “be one, so that the world may believe”, then we all need to stay attached to the love of Christ, attached to the vine, the source of all truth and love. And once again, we’re back to finding unity in that word “love” and quite rightly so. I will never apologise for sowing it into almost every sermon I preach because it is at the heart of everything Jesus does and in all that He commands. It is perhaps the only thing that we can all unequivocally relate to, it is what unites us entirely, and that is because we are each made in its image. Amen