

During this coming week we start to celebrate the Churches together in England week of Christian Unity

Churches together in England

(In their own words)

'Is the national **ecumenical** instrument supporting and encouraging churches from a wide range of traditions to work together in **unity**.'

So – **Ecumenical** – what does this mean:

A dictionary definition (vocabulary.com) has ecumenical as

'The adjective *ecumenical* refers to something universal, or something that has a wide, general application.

the term is most widely connected with religious unity, specifically Christianity. The original Greek root word, *oikos*, means "house," and that grew into the word *oikoumenikós*, which means "the entire world." Today it most often refers to bringing people of diverse Christian religions together'

Unity; what about this word...

It can be a powerful notion politically and nationally;

But Unity means (as says the Concise Oxford Dictionary) Oneness, being one ...being formed of parts that constitute a whole, due interconnection and coherence of parts...

I'm going to read you some extracts from the material published by Churches Together for this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2022

18–25 January (the feast day of the Conversion of Saint Paul).

This text has been chosen by the churches of the Middle East, the history of which was, and still is, characterized by conflict and strife, tainted with blood and darkened by injustice and oppression.

The story of the Magi visiting the Holy Family in Bethlehem is one very familiar to us. Indeed, we have recently celebrated Christmas and Epiphany. The Magi have sometimes been seen as a symbol of the world's diversity – different religions and cultures – that come to pay homage to the Christ-child. The story might therefore represent the unity of all created that God desires. The Magi travel from far-off countries, and represent diverse cultures, yet they are driven by the same hunger to see and know the new-born king and are gathered into the little house in Bethlehem in the simple act of giving homage. In this we can find a metaphor for Christian unity: that is, of different Christian peoples drawn together in their common search to recognise Christ, to know him and to worship him and witnessing to wider need for unity and to overcome injustice.

Christians are called to seek the new-born king, the king of gentleness, peace and love. But where is the star that leads the way to him? It is the mission of the Church to be the star that lights the way to Christ who is the light of the world. By word and through action the Christian people are called to light the way so that Christ might be revealed, once again, to the nations. Yet divisions dim the light of Christian witness and obscure the way, preventing others from finding their way to Christ. Conversely, Christians united in their worship of Christ, and opening their treasures in an exchange of gifts, become a sign of the unity that God desires for all of creation.

After encountering the Saviour and worshipping him together, the Magi return to their countries by a different way, having been warned in a dream. The

communion we share in our prayer together must inspire us to return to ourselves, our churches and our world by new ways. But what does this mean in practice? Serving the Gospel today requires a commitment to humankind, especially the poorest, the weakest and those marginalized. It requires from the churches transparency and accountability in dealing with the world, and with each other. This means churches need to cooperate to provide relief to the afflicted, to welcome the displaced, to relieve the burdened, and to build a just and honest society. This is a call for churches to work together so that we can all build a good future according to God's heart, a future in which all human beings can experience life, peace, justice, and love.

We are encouraged to reflect on this:

The desire to overcome the darkness that separates us compels us to pray and work for Christian unity.

Christ's coming disturbs the ways of the world. He comes in humility, denouncing the evil of injustice and oppression that accompanies the ambition for power, wealth and status. Jesus calls for a change of heart and a transformation of life, which will bring liberation from all that dehumanises. This creates disturbance precisely because he rocks the boat of those who seek only their own interests and neglect the common good. But for those who work for peace and unity, Christ's coming brings the light of hope.

We are invited to commit ourselves to act constructively to make justice a reality, acknowledging where we have strayed from God's ways of justice and peace. Then the answer to our prayer for Christian unity becomes visible as others recognise in us Christ's presence in the world. We can bring the light of hope to those living in the darkness of political unrest, social poverty, and structural discrimination. The Good News is that God is faithful, always strengthening and protecting us, inspiring us to work for the good of others, especially the victims of oppression, hatred, violence and pain.

The way ahead into unity with one another, into closer union with Christ, is not always clear. In our earnest attempts to build unity ourselves it is all too easy to lose sight of this fundamental message of the scriptures: that God does not abandon his people even in their failures and divisiveness. This is God's message of hope for the whole world. As the story of the Magi reminds us, God guides people of all kinds, by the light of the star, to where Christ, the light of the world, is to be found.

Let us go back to our reading today from Paul's letter to the Corinthians and look at some of his words...

(1 Corinthians 12 New International Version)

4 There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. 5 There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. 6 There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

7 Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. 8 To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, 10 to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues,^[a] and to still another the interpretation of tongues.^[b] 11 All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

So :

Unity is the gift offered to us by Christ. We grow in communion as we share the graces our different traditions have received, acknowledging that the source of all our gifts is the Lord.

Paul goes on in his next verses to say:

Unity and Diversity in the Body

¹² Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by^[c] one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

¹⁵ Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹ If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

Questions that we could answer:

What other ways of journeying together could we explore that would lead us into a better future?

What do we take for granted about our daily rhythms? What blessing might someone of another tradition receive from the worship in our churches?

How might the worship of our church be perceived by someone of another tradition?

How does it feel when our familiar ways or traditions are challenged?

A small Personal task for us might be: To find and join an online service from a church of a different tradition. Join in this act of worship and reflect on what riches God has shown us through this different experience of worship together.

Forgive me if I repeat this sentence, but I feel it is important:

Unity is the gift offered to us by Christ. We grow in communion as we share the graces our different traditions have received, acknowledging that the source of all our gifts is the Lord.

I'm going to end with prayer from Churches Together:

Prayer

Good Shepherd,

the fragmentation of your 'little flock' grieves the Holy Spirit.

Forgive our weak efforts and slowness in the pursuit of your will.

Give us wise shepherds after your own heart

who recognise the sin of division,

and those who will lead the churches

with righteousness and holiness, to unity in you.

We ask you, Lord, to hear our prayer.

Creator of light,

illumine our path by the light of Christ who moves before us and leads us.

May he be a beacon for our pilgrimage.

Enlighten us and dwell within us.

Guide us to discover a manger in our hearts where a great light still shines.

We thank you for the gift of that unfading Star, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

Heal our divisions and draw us closer to the Light that we may find our unity in you

Amen.

Matthew Lester; Home Team Ashdon 16th January 2022