

SERMON FOR UNITY WEEK | 24.01.21

Ezekiel 37: 15-22; Ephesians 4: 1-6; St Matthew 16: 13-20

Joe Ammoun, student on placement

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable to you, O Lord. Amen.

Well, good morning St James'. My name is Joe. I'm an ordinand training to be a Vicar, sometimes on placement with you. If we've met, thank you for your warm welcome. And if we haven't, I hope we'll be able to meet soon.

Now, did you catch any of Joe Biden's inauguration as U.S President on Wednesday? He spoke passionately about a renewed unity between all Americans. But he spoke with 25,000 troops on standby for violence. At a time when most Americans believe the biggest threat to their country is other Americans. We wish him well. But that division makes the U.S motto 'Out of Many, One' look like an out of reach aspiration.

And division isn't only a problem somewhere else. The last few years have seen bitter words fly between Brexiteers and Remainers. And more recently between Covid Shielders and Covid Sceptics. I've personally experienced the relational strain these divisions can cause. You may have too. Our culture longs for unity but isn't confident it can create it.

Is Christian Unity any different?

For eight days every year churches across the world pray for tangible unity to grow between all those who claim the name of Christ. For a unity our world could look at and go: "Their commitment to each other can only be a work of God." That's a deeply attractive vision! Especially if our lives straddle more than one denomination. Or if - like me - our families have included Christians from more than one communion.

But can that Christian Unity exist? And how can we further that unity? God speaks into those questions in today's readings. Because when we trust God has already created unity through faith in Christ, we can pursue unity around faith in Christ. With members of other denominations and within our own congregation.

But has God already created that unity? When we say the creed, we declare our faith in God. But we also declare faith in the Church! 'We believe in one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church' And the sceptical part of me wonders: could that be the hardest thing in the creed to believe? Because I don't expect to see God. But I might expect to see this one Church. And instead, I see over 33,000 denominations. Is it realistic to believe there's unity between a Roman Catholic from the Congo and a Trump-voting Baptist from Texas? And between both of them and us in Islington?

But God does unite very unlikely people. We heard that in our Old Testament reading. The prophet Ezekiel is with Jewish exiles far from Jerusalem. And the Lord tells him to do some street theatre. Take two sticks and join them together so they become one in his hand. Sticks representing Judah and Ephraim -or Israel. Two peoples alienated from each other, unable to overcome their divisions. But God promises he'll make them one nation. Unity depends on what God does.

I have three school-age kids. Florence, Aliza, and Johnathan. And home schooling is really showing us just how different they are from each other! And yet -through no decision of their own- there's a bond between them. They've been given common parents. And God promised he'd permanently unite divided people by giving them a common king.

That street-theatre prophecy didn't come true immediately - it was pointing to a unity under a king that extends to us in Islington today. In our Gospel reading we come to Jesus' disciples, faced with life's key question. Jesus asks: 'Who do you say that I am?' And Peter steps forward and answers: 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' "You're God's chosen king. We encounter God through you."

Peter was the first with this faith in Christ. Pointing us to the same faith. A faith filled out by what Jesus went on to do. Dying the death we deserve to bring us into the friendship with God only he deserves.

And all who share Peter's faith are part of the one church Jesus promised to build. Not an institution, but a family of believers joined across time and space by faith in Christ.

Two summers ago, the Tate Modern asked visitors to build futuristic structures with a tonne of white Lego bricks. It looked a mess! Each person engrossed in their own little structure. But from the artist's perspective, it was one united city. And from God's perspective - despite the mess of visible disagreement - there's one united Church. So, when we think about the difficult person who usually sits in the next pew, or the Congolese Roman Catholic, or the Trump-voting Baptist, can we appreciate our shared family likeness? Faith in Christ.

But families can struggle to get along, can't they? The world-wide church has often been that kind of family. But as our New Testament reading reminds us: To live as a member of God's family, means pursuing loving unity around faith in Christ. *'Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit.'*

And like the effort needed for an early morning run, pursuing loving unity requires self-denial. Putting aside our comfort for others. Otherwise, church families divide into competing clubs built around competing tastes. Contemplative vs. kid friendly services. Traditional vs. modern language. And similarly, without self-denial, denominations behave like endangered cultures: terrified that getting closer to each other might mean losing distinctive practices.

But when we focus on faith in Christ, we begin to reflect his loving self-denial in the way we treat other Christians. Like our New Testament reading encourages, we approach others with humility and gentleness. Patiently enduring those who aggravate us - just as God is patient in forgiving us. Loving others by always seeking their best - just as Christ loved us and sacrificed himself for us.

Unity isn't primarily pursued through structures -though they're important. Its pursued by believers focusing on faith in Christ, and so treating each other with self-denying love.

When I was at university, I had a friend aptly called Christian. We were from very different denominations, but I remember our conversations with warmth because we began with who Christ was to each of us. We tried to assume the best of each other. And we were able to pray for each other. There remained real differences.

But that approach was more fruitful than if we'd only focused on our distinctive beliefs. It meant the unity we did experience was rooted in the highest common denominator – Jesus.

Discovering with other Christians what the fullest possible expression of unity can be, is worth it. Some of our convictions may prevent structural unity. But here's the test: if we ever talk about our differences, would a non-church-going friend listening in be able to say: *Okay - Christians don't always agree. But I can see Jesus is more than just a word to them. And the care they show for each other is a million miles from the contempt shown on Twitter.*

And in lockdown, maybe this week of prayer for Christian Unity can prompt us to pray. For me, I'm currently praying for a Christian I find it hard to be patient with. And for a denomination I personally feel distant from.

Because we may not be able to leave home more than once a day. But we can go anywhere in prayer. As often as we like.

God has created unity through shared faith in Jesus. We pursue that unity with self-denying love. Where might that pursuit take us this week?

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.