

Agree among yourselves - 1 Cor 1.10

Sermon preached at Choral Evensong on Sunday 23rd January by Geoff Oates

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

At the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, our New Testament reading gives us Paul's rebuke to the believers in Corinth. They are arguing amongst themselves and forming factions, declaring themselves followers of Apollos, or of Cephas, or of Paul; and Paul is not happy!

We had a bad start to the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity this year, as three retired Church of England Bishops went off very publicly to become Priests in the Roman Catholic Church. I wonder what Paul would have had to say about that.

But do we really need to worry? Well, on one hand, no. If they really can't cope with women Bishops, so be it. And is the Church diminished? I don't think so. There is only one Body of Christ, there is only one Church on God's earth. It may have any number of denominations and congregations – but only one Church. And if three men have found a part of it they're happy in, good for them.

But on the other hand, we should worry. At the very heart of Christian faith lies our recognition of what God in Christ has done for us, and yet we spend so much Christian energy trying to get right the things we do for him – and **that's** where we keep falling out.

We fall out over doctrine, over how we understand the Bible, over what we're expected to believe; we fall out over how we worship, how we do the sacraments, what kind of music God likes; and we fall out over authority and hierarchy. If we can't find anything else to fall out over, there's always sexuality. Whilst it's good that we've at last stopped killing each other over these disagreements, Christians can still get pretty unpleasant with each other.

There's an old tale about two Scottish Ministers who meet in the street. One is Church of Scotland – the established church up there - and one is Free Church of Scotland – a non-conformist. Despite all the bitter disagreements between their respective denominations, the Church of Scotland pastor says, 'I greet you, brother, because we are both about the Lord's work'. 'Aye', replies the Free Church pastor, 'You in your way and I in His'. My way is the right way, the only right way, and yours is the wrong way.

When Kath and I were first preparing for the joys of parenthood, we became aware of a world of argument and debate whose ferocity quite took us aback. We read stacks of books and magazines (we were just too early for websites), telling us exactly how to bring up our baby. Breast feeding was the most fiercely debated topic of course, but that wasn't all. Should you keep your new born in bed with you, should you ever leave it to cry...And if we didn't do it all exactly the way this book told us, then we were bad parents!

And I remember a real sense of redemption when we came upon a lovely book called 'It worked for me...' This was vast collection of tips from real parents who had found answers to problems, which they offered humbly for anyone else to try as well; and as the title of the book hinted, if it didn't work for you, never mind, try something else.

And that is the way I think we need to understand the disunity – or rather, the diversity – of our Christian heritage. There are ways that work for us; because of our temperament, our cultural heritage, or simply what we are familiar with and comfortable with. These are the things that have helped us to grow nearer to God. And we can and should offer our own experience to others in that spirit – you try it too, see if it works for you. If it doesn't, try something else instead.

And this is an important point when we look to grow as a congregation. As the Bishop said last week in his DVD sermon, Christian

All Saints Alive

mission is not about persuading people to join **our** club. Not persuading them to come and do the things we like doing, but encouraging and helping them to discover the love and Grace of Jesus for themselves.

Matthew's Gospel, in his account of the calling of the first Disciples, has those lovely words in the old translation, 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men'.

There are times, and I believe our Parish is in the midst of such a time, when we too need to leave the comfort and security of the nets on the lakeshore, and go travelling. If the things that work for us are no longer tempting our neighbours to explore a pathway to Christ, we need to head out ourselves and explore new ways alongside them.

That is what Messy Church is aiming to do, what our All the Family services and our occasional Taizé style services are for.¹ It's a challenging time, because if we succeed, we too will have changed as a community, because we must open up our Church, not on our terms, but on God's terms. We must welcome our Parish not to our Church, but to their Church; and if we find ourselves, as I hope and expect, more diverse, we need not be any less united.

For the cornerstone of Christian faith is not what we do for God; it is about what God has done for us; and that is the root of Christian unity. It's not really about trying to close up, or plaster over the difficult gaps between our traditions of worship, the emphases of our doctrines, or even the gender of our Bishops.

Christian Unity really begins and ends in one truth: Jesus died for me. No man or woman can ever, need ever come before God with any other claim on their lips. This unity binds us together through all the barriers that human folly has tried to build around the Grace of God: The Death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ, works for all of us.

If we have enriched our lives with sincere worship, with loving fellowship and service, and even with an honest endeavour to

¹ At this point Geoff invited people to come to the forthcoming Outreach Meeting "to look for other possibilities". Ed.

make sense of the beautiful chaos of metaphysics and folk wisdom that makes up our heritage of theology, then God will rejoice with us, no matter what tradition we have belonged to. But he will receive us as his children for one reason only – that Jesus died for us.

And if we have spent our lives trying to persuade our neighbours that our style of worship, our doctrine, our system of church organisation, is the only right way to do things – and sadly there have been all too many of us who have done this – then God will yet forgive us and receive us: Because Jesus died for us.

And I will push the boundary of Christian Unity one stage further. Will we not still at the last stand united in Christ with all of mankind, even with those who have not sought, or have not found any path to lead them to faith. Is there one among them to whom Christ will not reach out in Grace; Child, you may not know me, but I died for you too. Whatever veil has kept you from seeing my love, I now tear away. The blood I shed on Calvary – works for you.

Outing to Stamford and Burghley House

This will be on Saturday 18th June 2011 at a cost of £23.00.

Stamford is a delightfully characterful market town, containing a museum, gardens and interesting shops. There are plenty of coffee shops and pubs for refreshments. At 1.30 pm we rejoin the coach to Burghley House one of the grandest Elizabethan Houses in the country. Used in the film "Pride and Prejudice", we have a guided tour at 3.30 pm and are free to explore the magnificent parkland, containing the garden of surprises and sculpture garden. There will be opportunities for tea before we leave at 5.00 pm.

Coach pick-up details:

The Avenue shops, Bengoe 9.00 am
Hagsdell Road, Hertford 9.10 am
The Goat, Hertford Heath 9.20 am
St Margaret's, Stanstead Abbots 9.30 am
John Warner School, Hoddesdon 9.35 am

Please ring Val Worboys on 01992 730565.