

Jan 22 - 10am HTW - WPCU

*Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in **agreement** and that there should be **no divisions** among you, but that you should be united in the same **mind** and the same **purpose**.*

*May the words on my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

This week has been momentous for the American peoples. They have seen a highly **controversial candidate** sworn in as President of the United States. There were crowds on Capitol Hill, not the largest ever seen, but nevertheless crowds. And yet just a few streets away protestors were expressing their disapproval by causing mayhem in the streets. There is **clearly not agreement** amongst all the American peoples that this President is the right one.

And yet **rhetoric about unity** has already come to the fore. The United States is referred to as one entity, simply as '**America**' - 'America will be made great again' is the mantra. How is such a **vast and diverse** country going to come together? How **realistic** is that aim? Donald Trump has placed much emphasis on the domestic agenda, but how is he going to **manage the diversity** that naturally and culturally exists across the United States? It will be interesting to see! But he will surely have to **take into account the nature** of the country, of the **organisation** he now leads, of the **vastness and diversity** of his people.

Less high profile this week, but no less important, has been another event where **rhetoric about unity** has come to the fore: the **Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**. This worldwide movement is being celebrated here in Cirencester, and began on Wednesday when several members from Churches Together in Cirencester gathered here for the evening Eucharist. Like the American people, Christianity is a vast and diverse body of people. And it seems to me that similar questions arise. How **realistic** is it that we aim to be united? How can we **manage the diversity** that exists between us? Do we not need to take into account the **nature of worldwide Christianity**?

Amongst the American people, if we can so homogenise them, there may be much **anxiety and fear** around for some. For others there will be **soaring hope and faith** in a new charismatic leader. There is clearly a **lack of unity**, and yet they have a **common goal** in sight - the prosperity of all. Amongst Christians, if we can so homogenise them, there can be similar emotions as they contemplate the question of unity.

This is not a modern problem. As our reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians shows us, it was ever thus, even from the earliest days of Christianity. This letter probably dates from the early 50s AD. There has clearly been division in the Church that Paul founded in Corinth, and he is appealing to its members for unity, that they should all be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among them. How realistic is this, given the nature of us human beings? And how important is it that they should be united?

I guess the difficulty in Corinth could have been brought about by many things, but it sounds from our reading as though there are several specific issues. There have been **quarrels**. The brothers and sisters of the Church are not behaving towards each other in a Christian way. Then there seem to be **allegiances** towards **different leaders**, perhaps in the Jewish way of being disciples of a particular rabbi. Perhaps some rabbis are more charismatic than others, and easier to relate to than the more distant Christ. Or was the correct **baptismal policy** not being followed? Whatever it was, there was disagreement and division. Difference of opinion was **detracting from the *mind and purpose*** that should have been uniting them.

Such a state of affairs we might unfortunately find all too familiar. Inevitably there are disagreements and tensions within any one church. Although it is a body shot through with divinity, it is nevertheless also a human organisation. How realistic is it to suggest that there should be no division among us, and that there should be uniform agreement? For us today there are still problems about unity within Christianity. Surely the thing to note is that these difficulties can detract us from our shared mind and purpose. What are we going to do about it?

It seems to me that often these problems are **rooted in** the very things that we Christians hold **most dear**: our worship, our scriptures, their authority and interpretation, our doctrine, our views about the very nature of the Church itself, how it should be ordered, and so on.

Is not one way forward to recognise that it is because **we care so much** about these things that we are passionate about them, deeply concerned about the truth of them, deeply committed to following Jesus **‘properly’ and ‘correctly’**, as his **‘true’** Disciples, the best Disciples we can possibly be?

But perhaps we also need to recognise that that concern about what is **true and proper** can lead us astray, into issues that, although important, can distract us from our main purpose. Do we not need to remember both **our nature and our purpose**? We are the Body of Christ, yes, but we are a human organisation too. As such the Church is shot through with divinity, but divinity that, whilst tangible, is also infinitely mysterious to us in our humanity. Don't let's allow the human to get in the way of the divine.

Christianity is a vast and diverse religion, where God is experienced and known and worshipped in many **vastly different contexts**. The diversity of religious expression across the United States of America is just one example among many. Such **diversity** need **not** be a **barrier**. It can be an **opportunity**.

Let's take a **right view of unity** and a **positive view of diversity**. Diversity is **not** necessarily something to be feared or ironed out into **bland uniformity**. To do so would be to impoverish our collective human response to the divine, mysterious, transcendent God. **Uniformity is not unity**. In our diversity we can reflect back to him in our worship and in the life of our varied church communities the glories of his diverse gifts to us, our wonder at his graciousness in saving each one of us, in all our individuality.

But as Christians, we do need **also to be together**, to worship God as the one Body of His Son. Just as in any united family, we can celebrate **each in our own way** and **yet together**. We can each develop and yet **share** and **use** together the gifts that God has given to each of his creatures. We can use and share the **insights** that each of our Christian denominations has discovered to enrich our collective understanding of the wonderful and mysterious God who has created us all, and who calls us all, just as did Jesus those first Disciples beside the Sea of Galilee.

**If** we can view **unity** as something quite **different from uniformity**, if we can **celebrate our diversity** and **use it** well, not allowing it to become contentious, **then** we can overcome any false barriers that divide us. We can rediscover our *shared mind and shared purpose*. And together we can concentrate on **what really matters** - proclaiming the Gospel, that message about the cross, which can seem so foolish to those who have not heard it or who do not understand it, and yet to us is the saving power of God.

**And so together let us pray**

*Father of all, we thank you for this week of Prayer that brings us together as Christians. We pray that it may enable us all to experience your presence in different ways. Grant us new ways to praise your holy name together, so that we may continue to seek reconciliation and grow together towards unity of mind and unity of purpose.*

*Lord, in your mercy*

***Hear our prayer.***