

Christ Church 1115; 22.1.12; Epiphany 3; Week of Prayer; John 2;1-11; B238

The week of prayer for Christian Unity. For some, that is the cause for a big yawn at yet another go at praying for the impossible. And anyway, the critics say: "What is the point of cobbling together a structure, when lively Christian faith is so diverse." But the critics should be reminded that Jesus prayed for unity, that St Paul wrote about unity. And then the critics should also understand that to find unity boring is merely to sell out to the spirit of our age. For unity is often seen as only temporary and fragile, in a world which feeds off individualism, diversity, conflict, fragmentation.

So we have the hard task of keeping the challenge of unity alive and fresh in a world which is not greatly interested. The Gospel values of love, consideration for others, community, solidarity - those are values at risk. True unity is not so much about talk, but rather about ideals and common action. I suppose that it is true of most things; if you want to get on better with a particular person you don't always look him or her in the eye and discuss how to get on better. Instead you **do** things together: play football, build a wall, campaign for justice for the oppressed.

Religion has its special difficulty when it comes to unity, for lots of bits of culture, politics, history get hitched to God and therefore made immovable in peoples' minds. At a meeting of the Council for Christians and Jews I heard a rabbi tell a story (as rabbis do) – it is a story that does the rounds. There was this pious Jew stuck on a desert island, and when his rescuers eventually came over the horizon, they saw that he had built two synagogues in his time on the island. There was only him there, so this seemed a bit much. "Why TWO synagogues?" His answer: "Well, one I go to for worship, and the other I wouldn't be seen dead in." You can tell the story about a Christian or a Muslim.

Unity. I have here a bowl. What I should do now is smash it to complete one illustration of the Church, but we need the bowl. So imagine it broken. Many people see the Church like that (as having been broken) and so the task is to repair it - trying to get it back as near as possible to its original state. You piece the fragments together, having discovered as best you can what the Church was like in the first place.

The reconstruction method – one way – but not, I think, much help. For a start the earliest Church was not all that united; you only have to read what Paul wrote to the Corinthians

to see that. And then, many elements of the faith and practice of Christians have developed over the years, with new insights into the person of Christ, into our place in the Church, and into the social and political implications of being a Christian. We would not want to lose all those insights. So, piecing together may not be the answer.

What other pictures of the Church are useful? The Church as a sacrament of Christ's presence here on earth. Christians as servant of the poor. The Church as herald, proclaiming the good news. All these are an aid to unity.

And then today's Epistle and Gospel: Christians from all over the place as guests at a wedding: the visionary marriage supper of the Lamb or the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. Now weddings are an interesting example of unity, for at a wedding you meet all kinds of people, including cousins you may not have seen for years and may even have been avoiding. Here is a good feast at which to re-discover them. And a great custom at a French wedding is the 'Vin d'Honneur' where the unity spreads beyond the wedding and includes the people of the whole community. The wedding at Cana was a sign of the way that Jesus transforms life, with overflowing grace and unity, like the wine: far more than enough.

Then, looking at our garden, the church perhaps like a flock of guinea fowl; we have 4 of them. They behave in a particular way which is both individual and collective. They have their diversity, yet as they move around, in wonderful sweeping patterns, they display an ever-changing unity. If, for some reason, one gets left behind, all the others go back and collect the one, sweeping her or him up, and on they go about their lawful purposes. So, not just diversity in unity, but also making sure that others are kept within the group and that it is always purposeful.

Let's try a more musical picture: the Church as not so much like a bowl which we piece together, but Christian unity like a jazz band. I ought to produce one as a visual aid, but I did not have one to hand.

It is not a perfect picture of course, but I offer it as a serious model. Jazz, as I understand it, is within a firm tradition. Yet that tradition is not a straightjacket. Each person has his or her own special place, so there's a lot of diversity. But the players must work together or the whole will be a mess. There is improvisation, but there are also themes and a

discipline. And much of the point is to celebrate. We could even go on.... much jazz as well as celebrating shows solidarity with the poor. And lastly: it comes out of very particular specific cultures yet is strangely transferable, like the Christian faith itself.

We do need pictures of the relationship between different Christian communities and ways in which they can work together in unity. That will lead us deeper into the truth, truth learned in practice. As we worship and work, so we can grow closer together.

How do we respond to Jesus' prayer and to St Paul's appeal? It is by work and prayer. I pray for the unity of the Church and I hope you will pray and work for unity too.... not just in this week of prayer, but all the year round. And I leave with you the picture not of the broken bowl under repair.... but rather of the flock of guinea fowl - or perhaps better of the jazz band: purposeful and united, within the tradition, yet new and creative. We need pictures to guide us.