

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2020: Isaiah 49.1-7; I Corinthians 1.1-9; John 1.29-42

Yesterday was the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity which runs until 25th, the Conversion of St Paul. To mark this I have invited Father Chris, the Dean of St Marie's Roman Catholic Cathedral, as our preacher this evening. The ecumenical movement has come a long way, particularly at the local level. It is important that we continue to work towards greater unity. But we don't just do that because it's a good thing to do. We do it because unity is at the heart of the Trinity. And we do it because of Jesus' prayer. He prayed that his followers may be one so that the world would believe. We do it for the sake of mission which, alongside unity, is another of the great themes of the Epiphany season. The incarnation of Jesus Christ, God sending his son into the world, shows us that mission is part of the nature of God. And by becoming human, Jesus invites us to share in that mission.

Mission is part of our calling as Christians, as human beings. And it can sound a bit scary but mission takes many forms. Evangelism, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in an explicit way, is part of mission. But mission is bigger than that. It is about growing the kingdom, making God's love known, bringing about peace and justice and caring for creation. And we may do that in our work. In our volunteering. At school. In our social activities. In our family responsibilities. Or through political involvement. God is at work in all sorts of areas of life and our job is simply to join in.

Our first two readings this morning both talk about calling. Isaiah writes, 'Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name.' Each of us is blessed with particular gifts that we are called to use in God's service. And one of the great challenges of life is discovering what those gifts are and how we might best use them. And when we do discover that secret we can find huge fulfilment. We find our groove. Our meaning.

And that sense of calling applies to churches too. No church can do everything. Each one discovers its strengths. Its charisms. And part of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is being able to recognise and celebrate the gifts of other churches. We don't need to feel threatened by other traditions. We can just give thanks for the ways in which God has blessed them and celebrate the things that they do well. And we see St Paul celebrating the church in Corinth in our second reading. A church called to be holy, enriched with knowledge and spiritual gifts. Paul helped to foster a variety of churches across the Mediterranean and he seems to have delighted in the many ways in which God's Spirit was poured out on different groups of people.

And we see a similar approach at play in our Gospel reading. John the Baptist began his ministry before Jesus. He had his own disciples. But he knew that his purpose was not to point to himself or build a power base. His purpose was to point to Jesus that he might be revealed to Israel. And when Jesus came along John recognised him immediately. This was the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Previously, John had imagined that Jesus would come in judgement, which he did. But John soon realised that Jesus was much more than that. The lamb of God came not just to judge sin but to be a sacrifice for sins. To take the sins of the world away. John's description of Jesus takes us right back to the sacrifice of Isaac and the Passover lamb at the Exodus.

When Jesus passes John and two of John's disciples, John points Jesus out. Look, there is the Lamb of God. And that is our job too. Not to point to ourselves but to Jesus. We don't have to have all the answers. We don't need to make other Christians in our image. Sometimes we just need to point people in the right direction and let God do the rest.

John's disciples follow Jesus. And, as he does on other occasions, Jesus asks them what they want. He doesn't tell them what they need, although he probably knows. He puts the ball in their court. And that's an important lesson in mission. Too often we decide what other people need and do it to them. And that infantilises them and often frustrates them. And they don't then own what is done. If we can meet people where they are, help them explore their needs and then empower them to find answers then those answers are often much more effective and long-lasting.

John's followers ask Jesus where he is staying. And he invites them to come and see. It was the tenth hour - about four o'clock. Tea time. Sometimes mission is just about hospitality. About inviting people to come and see. Creating spaces where they can discover Jesus for themselves. Offering them a cup of tea and the chance to chat. We are blessed with some wonderful spaces and part of our plans for this building are about how we can create more opportunities for people to come and see.

The ripples of that invitation spread outwards. Having been invited into tea by Jesus, Andrew, one of the two disciples of John, doesn't just keep this encounter to himself. He goes straight out and finds his brother Simon Peter and tells him that they have found the Messiah. Because of this, St Andrew is particularly associated with the missionary work of the Church. Simon Peter of course became the leader of the church. The rock on which it was built. But that wouldn't have happened without Andrew who made the introductions. Sometimes we just need to be the catalyst, the broker, the matchmaker. Sometimes we just need to spot the need or the gift in others.

In this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity I hope that you will pray for our brothers and sisters in other denominations. And for those who do not yet know Christ. Unity does not mean uniformity. God is at work in all sorts of people in all sorts of ways. And the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is a chance for us to celebrate that and get involved in God's mission. It is not about having all the answers but about being willing to share in the journey. Creating spaces where God can be encountered and inviting others to come along too. Amen.