

Year C Epiphany 3

Nehemiah 8: 1-10

1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a

Luke 4: 14-21

## **Christian Unity**

The week of Prayer for Christian Unity takes place every year, between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> January. These dates are significant to the worldwide church as the 18<sup>th</sup> is the celebration of The Confession of Peter and the 25<sup>th</sup> is the celebration of the Conversion of St Paul.

It is a time when the Christian church, in all its different expressions is asked to pray for unity amongst Christians.

*The theme for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 2022 was chosen by the Middle East Council of Churches: "We saw the star in the East, and we came to worship him." (Mt 2:2) More than ever, in these difficult times, we need a light that shines in the darkness and that light, Christians proclaim, has been manifested in Jesus Christ.*

‘Sharing Christ’s Light’ is what this week of Prayer for Christian Unity calls us to do. Sharing Christ’s light with other Christians, yes. But also we are called by Christ himself to share Christ’s light with all other people we come into contact with, for how else are we to show the love of God to the rest of the peoples of the world?

Our reading from the first letter to the Corinthians reminds us that the church, acting as God’s hands and feet on earth, has many members, and each has its unique part to play. Each person in each church, baptized into the one body, has received the same Spirit, but expresses this precious gift in different ways.

Within each congregation, within this congregation, we have different gifts, and can offer them in service to God. Our relationships within this congregation are themselves a visible expression of the love of God. As part of the body we share each others' lives, in good times and bad, and become visible, tangible, obvious expressions of God's loving care. We know God loves us when we are held in a wonderful community of love.

This is a vision for the church as a body of people, caring for one another and sharing the work of God in the world. We can only do this by the gifts of the Spirit who works through each of us. We are each part of the body, we belong to Christ, and we depend on the Spirit, the Spirit that is life.

The reading from Luke's gospel, where Jesus reads from the scroll containing the words of the prophet Isaiah (Is ch 61: 1-2) are so well known to us that we sometime don't truly hear them and take them to heart, and we can miss the little things which turn out to be so important to us.

One of Tom Wright's commentaries reminds us that Jesus had been preparing for this moment for over 30 years. Leading up to Jesus' visit to his home town he had prayed, he had studied and debated scripture, he had been baptised in the Jordan, and confirmed his vocation and had it thoroughly tested in the wilderness. In Luke's gospel in his hometown, amongst people he knew and also amongst people who thought they knew him, Jesus preached like a man inspired. Well, in fact, he was inspired, for Luke tells us that Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit.

In the synagogue the people heard the words of the prophet Isaiah from Jesus. The people would have had an understanding the

passage described the task of the Lord's Anointed, the Messiah, who would do the Lord's will.

Jesus omitted from the Isaiah reading the sentence, "...and the day of vengeance of our God." The people would have been expecting those words to have been said and they would have then started to wonder why Jesus failed to say them. No wonder, "the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him", and their eyes wouldn't have left him as he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

We know that Jesus said, in quoting Isaiah, that..

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

Luke emphasises that Jesus' work was to bring good news to the poor and had a deep concern for the liberation of the impoverished and the oppressed.

It won't surprise any of you that I have always thought this passage, what one may call Jesus' 'Nazareth Manifesto', is at the heart of the gospel message and has shaped my life in faith. I am certain that Luke is clearly nailing his colours to the mast too; stating that Jesus' words from Isaiah 61 should be the touchstone for how followers of Jesus live their lives, how it should shape our faith, for the simple reason that it was the principal concern of Jesus' ministry. It was what Jesus came to do. Luke is challenging us; how do we measure up in our lives to continuing Jesus' ministry of love, of healing, of a strong bias towards lifting up the poor, the oppressed, the prisoner.

In my life of faith I have on occasions been overwhelmed and humbled at what I have seen people do that takes up these words

uttered by Jesus, to continue His ministry. Some of this has been deeply spiritual, work based on prayer and guidance of others, some has been intensely practical – you only have to read the story of the creation of the Bethany Christian Trust to see what love in action can do.

However, in my life I have been occasionally disappointed when people profess to be followers of Christ, but find anything that disturbs their own sense of peace to be something they wish to avoid or deny. I pray that we are disturbed by Christ, that we are made to feel uncomfortable about an injustice, individual or systemic, uncomfortable about the suffering of a fellow human, surely made in the image of God just like us.

Christ does call us to care, and to be discomfited; discomfited enough that we will be part of the body of Christ, one of its members, who will wish to do something no matter how small, to try and make a difference, to show God's love, to reduce or end someone's suffering, and give them a glimpse of what God's kingdom is like.

I was talking to a dear friend of mine last week who has moved into a care home as she is no longer able to care for herself. She was upset that she is no longer able to contribute actively to God's mission through her church as she once did, but she said what she knew she could do was use the power of prayer. She could no longer be Christ's hands and feet, she said, but as a part of the body of Christ, her role now was one of prayer. Despite her physical frailty she will be a formidable prayer warrior, I am sure. Such conversations give me hope.

I know that the lens through which I see the world and understand my faith is not the same lens as others. I appreciate that sermons that focus on the issues facing the world, issues that should rightfully disturb and discomfort Christians, are not always easy to hear. I

make no excuse for raising those issues and asking the rhetorical question about how Christians should respond. However, I acknowledge that people do need to be fed and encouraged in their faith and given faithful hope, and there is definitely a place for offering this in sermons. I have said many times before that Christian hope isn't a passive state, just wishful thinking. Luke's gospel today challenges us to be agents of hope.

In this week of prayer for Christian unity, I sincerely hope we can all agree that Jesus' 'Nazareth Manifesto' is a succinct summary of His mission. A mission that shows what the kingdom of heaven will look like: When there are no poor remaining to be lifted out of their plight to a place of self-fulfilment; when all held captive by their thoughts and habits and their past experiences are released; when all who are blind to the wonders of God's love are given that sight; and when all acts of injustice and abuse of power and authority have been eradicated. Then will the kingdom of God be fully experienced, and we shall live in the deep Shalom of God. Until then, one way of ushering in God's kingdom is to follow the easy to say but hard to do command of Jesus: to love our God with all our heart, with all our mind and with all our strength, and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

As the body of Christ we are able to join in with Jesus' ministry by adhering to his new commandments; that everyone of us, each a different member, are able to contribute according to the gifts given to us.

'Sharing Christ's Light' through loving action, if nothing else, is surely where, as Christians across the traditions and denominations that have developed over the last two thousand years, we can find unity?