

Revd Michael Burns
Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon :
January 21, 2018 ~ “Epiphany 3”
Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

For many years now January 18 to 25 each year has been marked as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity – a cause which is very dear to my heart. Christians working together, worshipping together, sharing together is something in which I passionately believe. You may well have similar experiences but I’ll give you a few examples:

- 1st curacy in late 70’s – use by RC’s of our Church while theirs was being rebuilt.
- 2nd curacy – a shared Anglican, RC and Free Church and Community Centre in Stevenage – monthly Joint Eucharist, somewhat to the discomfort of the RC Bishop.
- 1st job as a parish priest on Epsom Downs – Methodist, Anglican, RC’s and Eve. Free Churches meeting together. It was only when we shared together in the Billy Graham MISSION TO LONDON in 1987 that things took off – we didn’t see a vast increase in churchgoing numbers, but did see much greater co-operation between the Christians of the 4 denominations – discovered that we could be friends and not rivals. Indeed St Marks Tattenham Corner is now a United Church of Anglicans and Methodists together.
- 2nd job as a minister – city centre church of Christ the Cornerstone in MK. 1st time in 400 years that a Roman Catholic Cardinal had preached before the Queen.
- Then for 17 years in Potters Bar, attracted by the work of Churches Together in Potters Bar – a natural working together in many ways, some of which would have been unheard of not so long ago. Working and sharing together by the Churches was assumed and valued.
- Finally here to Christ Church where Churches Together in West Wimbledon is an important part of the makeup of the Christian community. Clergy meeting regularly

together. Able to do as much as we can together as Christians – Good Friday Walk of Witness, Pentecost Picnic and so on.

- So over the decades there has been progress but we could do more together – hence the need for this week of prayer.

Susan Howatch, the novelist, has written: “The idea that religion should be locked away from everyday existence implies a failure to understand what religion is all about. A great religion is a world-view and a way of life, and if it doesn’t address itself to the realities of day-to-day living, then it’s of no use to those seeking meaning and value in their daily lives”. Christians need more than ever before to present a united front to the world.

In the first lesson set for today from Revelation, we are reminded that all worship is to be directed only to the true and living God. In the second lesson from John’s Gospel, we hear the wonderful story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee. I well remember visiting Cana and hearing this story read amongst all the tat shops selling the souvenir stone water jars. The miracle is described by John as being a sign of glory in Jesus, which led his disciples to believe in him. It is by any reckoning a strange sign, said to be the first miracle performed after the calling of the disciples. For surely it was a curiously insignificant problem, running out of wine at a wedding, compared with, say the healing of a sick or demon-possessed person? Yet maybe the event is important – because it reminds us that we can see life in terms of eternity rather than being trapped by time, by the immediate. The miracles that Jesus did when he was alive 2000 years ago were signs that led people to believe he was not just a good bloke or a nifty preacher – he was none other than the Son of God. What all the signs point to is a very real, very powerful God of love. And it is that God of love that Christian churches down the ages have tried to follow. We are all encouraged to see Jesus as Lord of all – and that goes on to include the whole Christian church – not just one particular Christian denomination but the whole Church.

So where does that leave us today? We the disciples, the followers of today have to be generous and outgoing, always ready to chat the Gospel with others – and to be prepared to work together with our fellow Christians in all that lies ahead. The Church is a body of people, rich from its diversity of types and gifts, and strong when it recognises its unity in Christ. When, as a body, we are open and receptive, the life of Christ in us can speak out love and truth to the world. Conversely wherever individual members lose their receptiveness to Christ, it is the whole body that is seriously weakened. So today we all need to reflect personally on our openness, our willingness to hear Christ speaking to us so that, together, we may be the gospel in the community in which God has set us.

Yet, of course, the Christian Church is still in many respects divided and so the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is still needed as we both celebrate what we do together but also as we pray to do more. For there really is no excuse for rivalry – for there is plenty of work for us all to do. Where do you do your shopping? Tesco's. Sainsbury's. Waitrose. Co-op? Each are people's preferences. Difference is that these companies are definite rivals. The different Christian Churches should never be rivals but always be ready and willing to work and co-operate together. We should be rooted in the world, just as Jesus of Nazareth was rooted in the world – even if merely as a guest at a wedding in Cana in Galilee.

Prayer of Commitment:

Lord God, we thank you for calling us into the company of those who trust in Christ and seek to obey his will. May your Spirit guide and strengthen us in mission and service to your world; for we are strangers no longer but pilgrims together on the way to your kingdom – and for that, we give thanks to God. Amen.