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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : January 20th, 2019
“Third Sunday of Epiphany”

EPIPHANY 3 — WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2019

Last Friday I managed to make time to go and see a newly released film *The Favourite*. I mainly wanted to see it because I like anything Olivia Coleman does and I'm also quite familiar with Hatfield House where it was filmed. The film is certainly an oddity. It tells the story of an 18th century England which is at war with the French. Nevertheless, duck racing and pineapple eating are thriving. A frail Queen Anne occupies the throne, and her close friend, Lady Sarah, governs the country in her stead, while tending to Anne's ill health and mercurial temper. When a new servant, Abigail, arrives, her charm endears her to Sarah. Sarah takes Abigail under her wing, and Abigail sees a chance to return to her aristocratic roots and the subsequent jockeying for position is what earns the film its title: *The Favourite*.

In an admittedly tenuous link as I was thinking about my sermon this week, the film led me to think of God and the Christian Church as it now exists! What would Jesus of Nazareth make of the current state of the church he came to found — divided for hundreds of years into many different groups and sects and factions, all potentially vying to be God's favourite, as it were. Some seem to view the Church of England as God's favourite and only church — but the truth is surely very different. For this wasn't how it started there in that manger in Bethlehem. Jesus of Nazareth came to this earth to show people how they should live — with two very simple rules: Love God and love our neighbours as ourselves. Simple and straightforward. What could possibly go wrong with this master plan? Well of course it was human beings that got in the way and almost from the start they began to argue and disagree about how this teaching might be interpreted and put into practice. Councils and Synods galore were held to try to bring about agreement — but they only succeeded in driving more of a wedge than ever before between Christians. Of course I am wildly over simplifying events but I think you know what I mean. So down the centuries the Christian church has become more and more fragmented and weakened by division and discord.

It wasn't until 1908 that the worldwide Week of Prayer for Christian Unity began which focused on praying for church unity during the 8 days of January and ecumenical becoming the buzz word. The adjective ecumenical refers to something universal, or something that has a wide, general application. The term is most widely connected with religious unity, specifically Christianity. The original Greek root word, *oikos*, means "house," and that grew into the word *oikoumenikós*, which means "the entire world." Today it most often refers to bringing people of diverse Christian denominations together; however, an ecumenical service held in Westminster Abbey might also bring Christians, Jews, and Muslims under one roof. And Amen to that.

Ever since I was ordained in the late 1970's I have regarded myself as an 'Ecu-maniac' if there is such a word. I have been very fortunate to work with Christians of other denominations in every place I have worked particularly in the new towns of Stevenage and Milton Keynes. Now in this parish, Churches Together in West Wimbledon has the highest priority for we should all be ready to stand together as Christians in work and witness and worship. Yes, there are still things that divide us but our task is to pray for and work towards their elimination so that Christians together can go back to the roots of the early Church and be one family under God. God does not have favourites amongst the many churches for all are one in his eyes; so it follows that we are all inter-connected with fellow Christians in other churches.

I might even venture to suggest that we are all inter-connected in many ways as human beings — for "no man /no person is an island" — but that comment could lead us into the murky waters of our current crisis in our relations with our neighbours. Mind you I love this definition of being British: "Being British is about driving a German car to an Irish pub for a Belgian beer, then travelling home — grabbing an Indian curry or a Turkish kebab on the way — to sit on Swedish furniture watching American shows on a Japanese TV". Yes, whether we like it or not, we are all inter-connected as human beings, in the same way that we are all inter-connected as Christians.

In today's Gospel, Jesus takes part in the hospitality and festivities on offer at the wedding in Cana. He was very much part of a celebratory event that might well have been going on for days. But in particular it is the actions and presence of Jesus that transforms an awkward situation — the embarrassment of low alcohol supplies — into one of abundance and delight. One of the most striking things about the miracle is that the wine poured out was the best wine — even though by this stage the guests would probably have made do with

something cheap and cheerful! Of course the story had a more explicit meaning because the sign reveals to us something of the true identity of Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah.

But above all the account reminds us that Jesus wants us to celebrate and enjoy our lives — and it is as Christians together we can do this as friends and not strangers, as partners and not rivals. So let us always be a congregation which strives to break down the walls that separate us and to work together with our fellow Christians in all that lies ahead. May that be our prayer in this the Week of Prayer for Christian unity.