

I Would Do Anything for Church Unity but I Won't Do That: Sermon Preached on 22nd January 2023 (Third Sunday after Epiphany)

Preached at St John's Devizes

1 Corinthians 1.10-18; Matthew 4.12-23

'...each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," ...Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you?'

The divisions between the churches are often given as a reason why people reject Christianity. Therefore it's a pity that we Christians can't put aside our divisions and reunite the whole universal Church into one body, so we can witness far more effectively for Christ.

Many a sermon during Church Unity Week has begun with a statement like this. I happen, however, to forcefully disagree with it. (That wasn't the bland and pious exhortation to ecumenism you were expecting twenty seconds ago, was it?)

Institutional unity wouldn't mean we all agreed on everything anyway. I mean, as you'll have noticed in the news this week, even in the Church of England we don't actually agree on *everything*. The Roman Catholic Church the one body of any size that regards itself as being the only true and universal Church, is as internally divided as any other. Some of you may have seen in *The Spectator* a few weeks ago the deathbed letter of George Pell, the former Primate of Australia and leading Roman Catholic conservative in the English-speaking world, excoriating Pope Francis and his papacy. Given how deep the divisions within existing churches are, I wonder why so many of us seem to think reuniting into one big worldwide church institution is an ideal we should all aspire to. We'd still be divided within it.

There's a negative way of thinking about the persistence of divisions among Christians, which is that they reflect our sinfulness, our pride, our inability to humble ourselves to truly discerning the mind of Christ.

I prefer to look at it another way. I prefer to start by noting that unity in Christ cannot mean uniformity, for that is not the unity that Christ modelled with His

disciples when He walked the Earth. In the Gospels, Christ gives the disciples the freedom to argue and fall out with one another, and to misinterpret what He had to say. A generation later, Peter and Paul fought like rats in a sack. The Church of their heyday was as divided over issues like circumcision and whether it was morally acceptable to eat food sacrificed to idols, as we are about same-sex marriage. Some of the issues that tormented the early Church seem obscure to us now, but if one takes time to understand their context they are about the same things that are most divisive in the Church today – identity, and the extent to which Christians should model a distinct way of life from the rest of society, or instead integrate within it to help it become more like the Kingdom of God.

So, if the Church was often divided from its beginnings, in ways that are still familiar to us, God cannot be expecting us to all be in one big global institution with a centralised hierarchy. That does not mean that I think Church unity is unimportant or that I'm hostile to it – far from it! – but I think we may have more interesting ways of living it out than institutional centralisation.

In the secular world, all of a sudden, it seems to be fashionable these days to call for people with radically different political views to be sacked from their jobs or banned from the media. The voices we hear on the media are often full of shrill moral certainty. The last thing we need is a big centralised Church trying to be as shrill and self-righteous as the political left, right, and centre. What might be far more valuable to our neighbours is not another variety of certainty but a means of living fruitfully with people we profoundly disagree with.

In that light, let me turn to the subject of this week's news reports, the Church of England's new policies on same-sex relationships. Now, while I felt I had to be open with you all about my sexuality when I came here, I really didn't want to spend my Sundays preaching about homosexuality and related issues. But the rota always seems to have me preaching when some major development in this area occurs. Given how much news coverage has been taken up with the C of E and homosexuality this week, I feel I need to address it. Perhaps I also need to trust that the Holy Spirit works through the rota!

I think our bishops have produced a good package of reforms. Personally, I am very happy that should Mr Right walk into my life, that while I might not be able to walk down the aisle with him, we can at least go to the registry office without this threatening my ministry and my livelihood. In fact, we could even have that civil marriage blessed a priest (or even a bishop!) afterwards. In France and Germany where clergy are not registrars, this is essentially the only thing Churches can offer to heterosexual couples. So while, like many of you, I am not happy that same-sex and opposite-sex marriages are being treated differently, I don't think this means either are being treated badly, and this still represents a dramatic change for the better.

What's interesting about these reforms is that the official teaching of the Church of England on marriage isn't changing. They are provisions for those who cannot in conscience accept that teaching, which from conversations I've had is probably a clear majority of us in St John's. These are provisions to permit liberals who dissent from a conservative official line to continue to be loyal and faithful Anglicans – I apologise for those over-simplistic binary terms but I can't think of anything else as succinct. Now, on the issues of women's ordination and consecration to the episcopate, something similar operates in the opposite direction, with provisions in place to enable conservatives who dissent from a liberal official line to remain Anglicans in good standing. I support both sets of provisions.

Some of you may well see me as arguing for a reactionary patriarchal cisheteronormativity to be allowed to flourish when it should be banished from the face of the Earth; others might see my sermon as a typical progressive assault on the historic teaching of the Church. My counter to both of those views is this: if we're interested in true Church unity, we need to work hardest of all to find ways to love and support, as our brothers and sisters in Christ, those with whom we have the most profound disagreements. If we were able to truly to that, we might offer hope to a divided and angry world.

When so much divides us, this morning's reading from St Paul's Letter to the Corinthians talks about the most powerful instrument for uniting Christians–

the Cross. At the Cross all but a few of even Jesus' most devoted followers ran away from Him. It is at the foot of the Cross that all of us – Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, progressive, reactionary, Socialist, Tory, whatever – learn that we are not good enough to live up to God's standards, but that God loves us anyway. It is only through Christ's sacrifice on the Cross that any of us are saved, not because we hold the right opinions but because God is love. Christ paid the ultimate price of God's love for all of us, those whom we agree with, and those whose views we find difficult to respect. For all of us, Christ's call in this morning's Gospel reading is the same – to repent and follow him, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

May our Lord and Saviour Christ keep us walking together towards that kingdom this Church Unity Week and until He comes again in glory to rule over us, not under a common bureaucratic structure, but journeying to the same destination: the Cross which is the gateway to eternal life.

And now to Him be praise and glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the Trinity in Unity. Amen.