

# The Sixteenth of Ordinary Time Sunday

21 July, 2024

## Message – Unity in Christ and in love

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Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life, revealed to us through servant love, open our hearts and minds, to your love and grace. **Amen.**

Today's gospel reading is a slightly odd selection on the part of our lectionary authors. The first part is the introduction to the feeding of the five thousand. We will get to hear the Johannine version of that miracle, the only pericope that appears in all four gospels, next week. The second part is the events following Jesus' walking on the water as the disciples are struggling to row across the sea of Galilee.

The connecting theme is the wholehearted response of the crowds to Jesus and Jesus' wholehearted response to all who come to him. Despite his exhaustion, Jesus has compassion for the crowds and heals all who come to him.

This is set in the context of Jesus' hometown rejecting him and a lack of understanding on the part of the disciples. Despite, their mini mission, being sent out to teach and to heal, and witnessing the stilling of the storm and the feeding of the five thousand, we are told the disciples '*did not understand*' (Mark 6.52a).

The lack of understanding is perhaps a device on Mark's part, inviting us to understand and to perceive what the disciples apparently could not. The one who is doing these things is the Christ, the Messiah, the one God sent to save.

Our reading from the epistle, probably not from Paul, to the Ephesians, is a reminder that the one sent to save was not just sent to save the people of Israel but to save all people, to save all creation. And, that that act of salvation has made us all one in Christ, we *'are no longer strangers and aliens, but... are citizens with the saint and also members of the household of God.'* (2.19)

Unity is a repeated theme through the New Testament. Yet, it is not something that the visible Body of Christ, the Church, is known for today. To the outsider, perhaps even to the insider, it seems most Christians believe they have the correct understanding of the way of Christ and believe nearly every other Christian is a heretic.

If you have a little free time, you may like to, use the web search engine of your choice, look for versions of the Christian denominations' family tree. It is shocking to see how addicted we are to dividing ourselves.

We are a poor witness to Christ having unified us, having broken down the walls that divide, having removed the hostility between us, and to Christ being our peace. Christ has reconciled all of us to God through the cross.

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians is not directly talking about Christian denominations. The writer is addressing the split between those of Jewish heritage and those of gentile heritage; those who were already in a covenant relationship with God and those who knew no such relationship. The writer is addressing this to a church whose criteria for membership was the desire to follow the way of Christ and a profession of Christ, who died on the

cross for us and rose again, as Lord.

There were no doctrines to argue over, no set of right beliefs to which they must all ascribe. These followers of the way are drawn together by their passion to follow Jesus's way, to follow the one who said, '*I am the way, the truth and the life.*' (John 14.6) This is surely the real body of Christ, a body that today overlaps with the church but which is not coterminous with it. Some members of the body may even be outside the church because the church has wounded them so deeply.

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians draws on two verses from Isaiah (57.19, 52.7) to point to God's purpose, '*So [Christ] came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through [Christ] both... have access in one Spirit to the Father.*' We should know, and be in, peace and unity with all who follow Christ.

The challenge of this is profound. I am sure that if we dug deep enough, no one here would be in total agreement with anyone else here in their understanding of God and God's work of salvation. There are a wide variety of reasons for this. Even with our high degree of shared culture, none of us share exactly the same life experiences and, unless we are an identical twin, none of us share the same biology. Our nature and our nurture combine to create diverse and unique children of God.

The surprising corollary of this is that there are people in very different denominations, or even in no denomination at all, with whom we share far more than we would expect and with whom we will share more than with some

members of our own denomination, particularly when we consider the breadth the Anglican church encompasses.

In our diversity, in each one of us is the image of God. The image of God is present in those whom we love and agree with and those whom we struggle to love and certainly don't agree with. Starting with the view that others are equally children of God, our actions towards them must always be loving. If we are an image of, a reflection of, the God who is love, our actions towards all creation, not just people, must be loving. This is at the very heart of being a follower of the way of Christ.

We are left with a very deep dilemma. Is it every right for the church to split. Who can say what are right beliefs and right actions, orthodoxy and orthopraxy? Given our diversity, all of us are going to be in error in some ways. There will be some surprises for all of us when we come before God. We will all need God's grace and forgiveness.

Christ's own teaching speaks to this dilemma. Christ starts from the basis that others will know that we are followers of the way by our love for one another. Further, we will show love for our neighbour, with our neighbour being whomever's life our life touches. When such radical love is not seen in us, we are failing to follow the way of the Nazarene, Jesus Christ, God's Son, Our Saviour.

Looking at many of the divisions in the church, as time progresses, both sides of the original division are often present within both side of the split church. While there is an obvious irony to this, it also reflects the reality of the complexity of life. We are all deeply rooted in the

community and identity within which we are born and will reflect that despite the changes and challenges of life that will shape and transform us along the way.

As we reflect on the teaching of Christ, we will find other stories that speak to the dilemma. Because we are all different, it will be different stories that may speak to us.

For me, the parable of the last judgement, the division of the sheep and goats, speaks profoundly of the need for loving action above right belief. According to the parable there will be people welcomed into heaven who did not even realise that they were following the way of Christ. If we are honest, we have probably all met such people.

The parable of the two brothers, asked to work in the vineyard, again speaks of action, this time contrasted with words rather than belief. The acknowledgement that a tree is known by its fruits with the implicit question, what are our fruits, speaks to the outward signs of faith, not words nor belief. Do we show love in our lives? Do we meet the needs of others and bring them wholeness? The answer for the church is too often no, we do not bring healing, wholeness, and the fullness of life that Christ offered to all.

Within the cathedral are a wide range of perspectives, views and beliefs. We are united through our liturgy, carefully crafted words drawn from scripture and given expression for a new generation with imagery ancient and contemporary. Our guiding light is our desire to follow the way of Christ, to be servants of the servant king.

We won't always get it right but here we hope everyone will experience the love of God who created them. Here

we will try to love as God first loved us. Here we will try to listen to one another and understand one another. We won't always agree but we will disagree in love.