

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

(Jonah 3:1-5.10 / Mark 1:14-20)

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Preacher: Rt Rev Trevor Williams (formerly Church of Ireland Bishop of Limerick)

21.01.2018

First of all I want to express my appreciation to the Brothers for their invitation to speak to you during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

It is true that our Churches are divided. But I also believe that the Unity we have as Christians together, as members of the same family, is at a much deeper level than the differences between our denominations. And our world needs most of all to see how we can live creatively with differences of race, culture, politics and religion.

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near: repent, and believe in the good news”.

Perhaps the shortest sermon ever preached. This is a special moment, says Jesus, The Kingdom of God is near, Now is the time when fulfilment of God’s plan begins, where God’s presence will be seen and witnessed, where the world as God intends it to be will be made visible. This new world order is in contrast to the way things are and have been, God’s power is bringing about a new world. Repent and believe. Repent here is much more stop your sinning, Repent and believe means to open up your minds to accept the wonderful new reality the love of God has in mind for his world, and let that new reality shape your life. That was Jesus first sermon in Mark.

So what does it mean to respond to the call of Jesus during this week of prayer for Christian Unity.

We are being called to open ourselves to a new reality - the reality that St Paul points us towards in the letter to the Ephesians

***Ephesians 1 v 9f.** With all wisdom and insight, God has made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

Christian Unity is not just about resolving the differences between the Churches, it encompasses the universe, bringing to fruition the loving intention of God for all of creation. In place of violence, division, and suffering, God’s will is justice and peace for all, reconciliation and right relationships. This is Christian Unity. And this is the message of Jesus we are challenged to accept. To open our hearts and minds to the new reality that God wishes to create in our world, and live out that reality in our daily lives as we follow Jesus.

This is not easy.

Remember Jonah? - we only heard the end of the story. Jonah didn’t want to preach in Nineveh the capital of Assyria for very good reason. Assyrians were Israel’s sworn enemy. They ransacked the northern kingdom and overthrew it, only to be followed soon by the complete devastation by the Babylonians who overtook Assyria. Why would God want to be merciful to them, the nation that has completely destroyed us?

But that's who God is. The God who makes enemies friends. The God who is about reconciliation. The God who is working to bring all things together in Christ.

Jesus in his life and death, showed what God was like, what the kingdom of God is like, in healing the sick, having meals with unsavoury characters, befriending the outcasts and sinners. And Jesus, while we were yet sinners, died for us. That's how we know God loves us unconditionally, and uniquely. This Eucharist is where we immerse ourselves again in that reality, the love of God for each one of us. It's God's love working in us that creates the unity that God desires and for which we pray during this week.

I have learnt much from this community here in Holy Cross. How, when we welcome others, as we would welcome Christ, we are being agents of God's loving action in creating unity. I have benefitted as no doubt you have from hospitality of this community in the spirit of Christ. It is a wonderful blessing and gift.

Seeing 'that of Christ in the other' can be a way of living. I was recently at an Ecumenical meeting Bishops in Poland hosted by the Focolare. There were 35 of us, from all parts of the world. There were orthodox Christians, Catholics, Anglicans, Maronites, and Lutherans together with Reformed Church leaders. We gathered for a week to discuss the Blessed Virgin Mary. A controversial topic between some Christians. But as we listened to each other, and sought to recognise that of Christ in the other person, we never got into point scoring, or arguing who was right and who was wrong. At the end of the week we all agreed that we had benefitted greatly from sharing our differences, deepening our understanding of our own tradition as well as others. At the end of the week, we made a commitment to one another as bishops, and church leaders of different denominations, to support, encourage and pray for one another and our respective churches. It was an experience of living Christian Unity, as we prayed that one day we could celebrate fully together at the Eucharist.

In Limerick when I was bishop, the Roman Catholic Bishops Donal Murray and Brendan Leahy invited me to work closely with them. Bishop Brendan invited me to meet to simply read the scripture and pray together.

My successor the present Church of Ireland Bishop of Limerick Kenneth Kearon and Bishop Brendan Leahy have been commissioned jointly by Pope Francis and the Archbishop of Canterbury to work in partnership, together, in the Churches mission to bring good news of Jesus Christ to their communities.

The danger of seeing Christian Unity merely in terms of the uniting of our denominations is that we can remain blind to what is possible to do in our own lives here and now to promote Christian unity. Rather than the formation of a huge unity global Church uniting all Christians, it may be that what the world needs right now is to learn how we can to live with differences. Lovingly, learning from diversity while deeply respecting those with whom we disagree, and seeing in that encounter the opportunity to learn and grow.

Each of us can welcome others as we would welcome Christ. That is living the personal charism of Unity which Christ has given to each of us, as we participate in the fulfilment of Christ's last prayer, that we may be one, as He and the Father is One.