

Pastoral Letter 19.1.22

Dear Friends

By the time you read this letter we will already be in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Jan 18-Jan 25). The reason we have this week year by year is because it is clearly important to Jesus that his followers have a sense of belonging together. 'I ask...that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe...' (Jn 17:21-22)

Unfortunately, Christian churches have a horrible habit of splitting up. For the first one thousand years there was only one church until in 1054 there was the Great Schism when the Church broke into two with the Catholic in the west and the Orthodox in the east. That was it for another 500 years until in the sixteenth century Reformation there was a split between Catholic and Protestant.

Today, some observers put the number of denominations worldwide in the tens of thousands. And in the towns and cities of the UK we are very aware of the number of different churches. The last time I counted the number of churches in Guildford, for example, there were over 40, many of them community churches meeting in theatres and civic halls, day schools and public houses. How far we have strayed from the will of Jesus. There is the story of a preacher spending most of a sermon on Christian unity tearing up a sheet of paper into smaller and smaller pieces as he illustrated the way we Christians have thought to know better than Jesus.

Mark Oakley illustrates the problem vividly: Imagine if, instead of Communion, the Church had decided to centre its worship around the washing of feet command instead of the bread and wine command. We would be having arguments about which foot should be washed, right or left, and there would be the Church of the Left Footers and the Communion of the Right Footers, we would hold synods on whether the water should be hot or cold and we'd be fighting over whether women can wash feet, whether gay people can have their feet washed...

There are, however, signs of hope from time to time and to these we must cling. In 1966, Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Michael Ramsey met in Rome. They signed a declaration affirming their desire for unity. Then the Pope asked the Archbishop to take off his episcopal ring and he slipped on to Michael Ramsey's finger his own ring, the one he'd worn as Archbishop of Milan. Michael Ramsey wept and he wore the ring for the rest of his life. Such gestures are important when we're dealing with the torn fabric of a divided Church.

I trust each one of us may find the time and the inclination this week to pray for Christ's Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church...that it may be One.

Blessings

Allan

Rev. J. Allan Taylor