

Third Sunday of Epiphany – 22nd January 2023

“Be united in the same mind and with the same purpose,” says Paul, writing to the Corinthians. He means be united with other Christians. Well, that’s all very well. With the recent developments in the Church of England many of us don’t feel a bit united.

You will have heard the House of Bishops’ announcement that the church’s policy not to allow gay couples to marry in church is to stand and will not be debated in Synod as had been expected. So committed gay couples may still not, by law, be married in church. Their announcement has already caused hurt and anger on both sides of the debate. It is unacceptable to conservative evangelicals because the plans do allow clergy to bless the union of gay couples, and it is insulting to almost everyone else to whom it feels like prejudice and discrimination.

In addition to the disquiet generated by the bishops’ announcement there is financial concern in the church. Income has fallen during the past two years of covid and our Diocese like many others sees no alternative but to reduce the number of stipendiary clergy and curates and to sell clergy housing – houses which will never be replaced. Not everyone agrees with that response. Bath will not be immune. Some churches in Bath will either have to share a minister in partnership with another church or close.

Christ Church is financially independent but we are still part of the body of Christ in Bath and we share the anxiety of our sister churches and worry with them about their financial viability over the next few years. What we and they must not do is allow the fear and concern about any of these issues to lead to disunity. Somehow, we have to find a way to have the same mind and purpose in spite of profound theological disagreements and competition between churches for scarce resources.

Today we hear Paul writing to the new Christian church in Corinth encouraging unity. Christianity was still young and unformed when Paul wrote. The Christian community in Corinth can only have been five or ten years old. They had no building, no church council, no paid ministers and probably no other Christian church within a day’s journey of their own community, so they had no model of how to live together as Christians.

Writing to them from a distance, Paul was struggling to build them into a united, worshipping community. He was worried about their behaviour both as individuals and as a community; their squabbles and their jostling for power when he called them to be ‘united in the same mind and with the same purpose.’

We, by contrast, have beautiful church buildings, a magnificent cathedral in Wells, music and vestments and liturgy to emphasise the glory of God but we are still not united with the same mind and the same purpose.

The House of Bishops’ decision not to allow gay marriage to be debated at Synod came about because the bishops realised that they themselves would not pass the motion with the required two thirds majority. So, even if it had been discussed at Synod and the houses of laity and clergy had both voted in favour of change, the bill would, ultimately, have been defeated by the House of Bishops.

But I think it also true that the bishops lost their nerve. They didn’t want a fractious debate with a public splitting of the Anglican Communion into a North/South divide, with, perhaps more conservative clergy from the global South pitted against generally more liberal Northern European and American representatives.

But what a lost opportunity for the working of Holy Spirit.

The word *synod* derives from the Greek *syn* (together) and *hodos* (road), meaning to journey together on a road. What a metaphor that is for the work of talking and debating together. Isn't the whole point of discussion and debate to discover the views of one's opponent? What they believe and why? To be open to persuasion? To be open to the power of the Holy Spirit to change our minds? The decision not to raise the question in Synod as they 'journey together' shows a lack of trust in the workings of the Holy Spirit.

But, as Paul points out, somehow we have to look above our serious and significant differences, to the human beings who hold those different views and recognise them as faithful Christians, genuinely living out what they believe following Jesus means, even where we profoundly disagree.

Jesus calls unexpected people to follow him to walk together with him on the journey of faith. They include Judas who would become the most hated person in the world. They include people who have no special virtue – people like me and maybe you – so we can't expect every Christian to agree with us however certain we are that we are right.

Paul called his squabbling, infant church to be 'united in the same mind, purpose, focus and direction.' The purpose and focus is Jesus, his life and words, and the change of direction is the repentance to which Jesus calls us as we journey together.

Although we may not be able to be united in agreement, and individually we may feel called to protest or apologise, we are all part of the body of Christ. We have to pray for those with whom we disagree that they may have a change of mind and for ourselves that we can find those areas in which we do agree – in love of God and each other and creation. And as we try to find areas of agreement it may help to remember that any one of us can make an honest mistake in faith.

I think that the final judgment will be a review of all our words and actions, all our mistakes and failures in the presence of Jesus. And in the light of his truth we will realise what he would have done in our place at each moment of our lives. The pain of judgement will be recognising the unnecessary suffering we have each of us caused through our decisions and words and attitudes to people whom we didn't even notice on the road.

In that spirit may we finish with a prayer:

Saviour Christ,
in whose way of love lies the secret of all life and the hope of all people,
we pray for quiet courage to match this hour.
We did not choose to be born or to live in such an age:
but let its problems challenge us, its discoveries exhilarate us,
its injustices anger us, its possibilities inspire us,
and its vigour renew us for your kingdom's sake.
Amen