

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

We are currently in the week of prayer for Christian unity. As such, I'm not going to talk about any of the specific Bible readings this week, but just get us thinking about unity for a moment.

I did that dangerous thing of looking at Wikipedia, on a page listing Christian denominations by number of members. This list was long. Between some of these divisions the differences are small. But between others some of the differences are quite great. But the big categories are between Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, and the differences form from historical church politics, from theological disputes and from differences in worship.

The first big division happened in 451 at the Council of Chalcedon (which is now Kadikoy on the Asia side of Istanbul). Here a debate about the dual nature of Christ — both divine and human — led to a schism in the church between Catholic and Oriental Orthodox Christianity. As far as I can see, the theological differences were on very technical points. But the political differences made the split permanent and irreconcilable.

Another six hundred years later came the Great Schism. Again this was partly political and partly theological. The Catholic church was using Latin, the Orthodox, Greek. The catholic west was jostling for supremacy over the east. In the midst of this came a dispute of the wording of the Nicene creed. Into the paragraph on the Holy Spirit: 'who proceeds from the Father' ... was added 'and the son'. Big deal? Big deal apparently. This tiny addition was made without a council being called and the greek-speaking church had had enough. The Orthodox church still asserts the importance of the creed remaining in its earlier form.

The final major split was of course the Reformation. Grumblings and discontent with the Catholic church had been felt for some time when Martin Luther pinned his 95 theses — his 95 points of discussion — on the door of Wittenberg church in 1517. He hadn't wanted to pick a fight, just a chat, but his questions were taken as sedition, and then the whole thing just exploded. In the next hundred years or so there was an extraordinary outbreak of theologising as Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and many more revisited the Bible and found fresh understandings of the New Testament. Alongside this fresh theology came a swathe of new denominations — Lutheran, Baptist, and of course Anglican being only some.

Since then denominations have proliferated, and even within anglicanism you find churches that are very traditional, very modern, very catholic, very reformed, very pentecostal in spirit and so on. Where is the Christian unity? Isn't this a joke?

Despite all this schism and diversity all these churches still believe in a triune God — that God is one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We may not understand this, but we know that God is perfectly one, perfectly united, and yet three persons. The Father does not have a thought that the son and the Holy Spirit do not share in and agree with. Each is equally God, but also distinct. Analogies fail when we try to describe this — the three leaved clover is a start, but it fails to tell us that the Father and the Holy Spirit are fully in the Son. Perhaps if we think of a chord played on the organ or the piano, we might get the sense of three notes each distinct, but creating one chord.

And the thing that binds God together is love. God is love, John teaches us. So the loving Father loves the son, who loves right back, and the Holy Spirit is their love, and is also her own person. Perfect love leads to perfect unity.

And so we come back to us, and the week of prayer for Christian unity. Because if we want Christian unity we desire to be united in Christ, we want to be more loving, so that our differences become trivial compared to the love and grace which we have for each other. We will become likeminded, because we are Christ-minded. Paul urges the Christians of Philippi: 'then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.'

In Peter's first letter he urges us: 'Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.'

If we are praying for Christian unity, we are praying for an increase in Christian love.

Amen. SDG.