

SERMON: Our Unity in Christ: Acts 4.32-37; Psalm 133; 1 John 1.1- 2.2; John 20: 19-31

Most beloved Father, thank you that we are truly one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord! May our unity bring to you joy and to us great peace and blessing. Amen.

Every now and then the lectionary texts throw up a theme that both resonates instantly with the preacher and has clear application to the circumstances of their flock. Today is one such occasion for me! During our week of prayer the theme of “unity” was very prominent through the prayers of many people in each of our three parishes. Today all of our readings touch on different aspects of that same topic! In particular they raise two important questions: Why do we need to live in unity? And, how do we live in unity?

Why do we need to live in unity?

Our Psalm 133 could not be more precise in its message: ¹ *Behold how good and how lovely it is: when families live together in unity.*

The beautiful imagery of fragrant holy oil and soft falling dew makes it clear that this unity is a precious blessing from God himself. I suggest that the unity referred to here, as alluded to in our reading from Acts, is a unity of our hearts and souls. It goes beyond unity based on our religious ideas or worship traditions; neither is it unity based on our denominational or parish identity, nor is it purely founded on our blood or kindred ties. Indeed, it is an essential part of our God given make-up to enjoy the company of others. Even the most introverted of us recognize the benefit of being deeply connected to people we trust and love. We need the ministry of friendship from the cradle to the grave.

So the answer suggested here as to “why we need to live in unity?”, is in two related parts: it is the way our Creator has made us and He has made us that way because through it we can be blessed with undeniable personal and social benefits.

How do we live in unity?

That leads us to the more complex question of: How do we live in unity?

Response 1: Sharing our worldly possessions

Verse 32 of our Acts reading tells us: ³² *Now the whole group of those who believed, were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.*”

This paints a very vivid picture of the communal living that the early church embraced. Most modern commentators are quick to stress that this doesn't require all Christians to emulate this approach and become socialists! But neither should we be too quick to discount the lesson to be learnt from their example. Our own church structure is dependent upon the lay followers of Jesus, metaphorically laying before the feet of each of their priests, sufficient of their worldly possessions to enable the flock to be led in proclaiming the gospel message. Without that expression of unity of heart and soul there would be no church community as we know it. Barnabas, Charnwood's namesake, was indeed one of these disciples who did just that. His selling of his field helped to give the first apostles the support they needed to preach with great power.

So the first answer to the question of "how do we live in unity?", is to freely share with one another the possessions with which God has blessed us.

Response 2: Proclaiming Jesus

For our second answer let us turn to John 20. This gospel reading is set in the evening of the very day that Mary Magdalene announced to the disciples that she had seen the Risen Lord!

In verses 21 to 23 we're told that:

²¹ Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³

Here we have a shorter statement of the Great Commission given in Matthew's gospel. Jesus sends out the apostles and ultimately all of us, his followers, to share His Father's message to the world. These few words have three huge implications. First, Jesus needs us, the body of Christ. He is dependent on His church to reach out to all of God's children. Second, we need Jesus. We cannot deliver God's message without the power and authority of Jesus, through the Holy Spirit. Third, Jesus gave us the example to follow. We can only fulfil our commission when we strive to live as He commanded. All this together means that our unity can only exist when we are centred on Jesus himself. Within this parish we have people from different ethnic backgrounds and individuals practice a variety of worship traditions. Across the globe Christians come from every social class, multi-cultures and many denominations. The diversity is massive and yet there is a unity. The second answer to the question of "how do we live in unity?" is that we do it by the shared proclamation of our Risen Lord, Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. He and he alone, is the source of our unity.

Response 3: The Forgiveness of Our Sins

It is this very proclamation made in 1 John. At verse 5 we are told:

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.

Last Sunday we blessed and lit our Paschal candle to symbolise the light brought into the world by the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. To be able to walk in that light together with our fellow believers is a vital instruction from Jesus. Put simply, it is to repent. This too was a message received during our week of prayer. 1 John goes on to remind us in verses 8 and 9:

⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The realisation that we do indeed have sin within us, can be a bitter pill to swallow. But once accepted, oh such freedom is granted us as we walk in the light of our advocate, Jesus Christ the righteous. It is a vital part of that walk to regularly conduct a spiritual self-audit. This can be as simple as asking ourselves: “Is there anything in our life that we would be uncomfortable letting anyone else knowing about?” If there is, then we can ask for God’s guidance about what to do. He wants only for us to be brought out of any darkness into the light of Christ’s truth.

It is this act of self-reflective repentance that informs the third answer to the question of “how do we live in unity?” When we recognise that we are all forgiven sinners, then we can fellowship together without judgement of each other, united by Christ’s atoning sacrifice for our sins.

A Practical Application

Now in case this all seems a little too theological or distant from your lived reality, let’s bring it back to a practical application. I’d like us to reflect on what living in unity means in the context of our preparation to welcome our brothers and sisters from St Paul’s and our ongoing collaboration with St James:

How can we share our worldly possessions together to promote God’s ministry?

What might proclaiming the Risen Lord together look like?

How can we walk in Christ’s light together?

I will finish with the chorus of our gradual hymn:

Bind us together Lord, bind us together with cords that cannot be broken.

Bind us together Lord, bind us together, O bind us together in love AMEN