

Reflection for Sunday 24th January 2021

John 15; 1-17

Abide in Christ and...

“Abide in my love and you shall bear much fruit”. This is the theme for the 2021 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, prepared by the Community of Grandchamp – this community has its origins in Europe in the 1930s, when a group of women of the Reformed tradition sought to rediscover the importance of silence and listening to the Word of God.

Christian Unity is one of the greatest challenges we have ever faced, and it continues to be a divine mandate, as such it should not be a matter of choice for us. And yet..., and yet we are far away from achieving it, and I believe this reading today helps us see why.

I am also aware that the set Bible Readings for last Sunday (John 1: 43-51) and this Sunday (Mark 1; 14-20) narrate Jesus’ call of the first disciples. A reminder that such a call is not a one off to a certain group of people back then, but rather a continuous calling which includes us, here, now. If we look at the gospel narratives the first thing we could do is raise an eyebrow: does Jesus really know what he is doing? Just look at the people he calls – not too worthy, are they? And with few exceptions the same thing could be said about any of us. And yet, we do believe Jesus knew what he was doing.

The calling is set out to simple folk, people seeking a meaning, a direction, and a mission. I hope this could well define us too: Vulnerable, imperfect, confused, contradictory people who could often do better. But we realize that it was not perfection God was calling, but something quite different. Probably dedication would fit the norm, and a way of communicating to the wide world that being loved and loving is what makes us fit for the calling. **Being loved. Loving.** We can try that, don’t you think?

And it is in this context that we are challenged by the theme of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity this year: *Abide in my love and you shall bear much fruit*. The fruit we bear then is a result of abiding in God’s love, not a production of our own good will. This too is an expression of our discipleship. This is what God wants us to share with the world. This is what makes us worthy. We can say the most wonderful words, but our actions have to live up to those words, as we hear Jesus say in Matthew 7:16 “By their fruit you will recognize them”.

Why don’t we go back to the reading, and take a detailed look at it; what verse/s jump out and speak to you in a surprising way”?

Personally, there are two moments in the reading that impact me:

- Something that is horticulturally true as well as theologically true: “no branch can bear fruit by itself” (vs4).
- “I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit” (vs 16)

They are a constant reminder that each of us is part of something much larger – we are branches joined to the tree, and this is the only way we can bear the good fruit. God has chosen us for this, even when we may not be the best of the best.

And the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is a reminder that one of the aspects of our discipleship is that constant prayer on one hand, and that we too must be agents of unity on the other. This is not something that we can leave to others. It is working together with others that this is achieved.

So, how do we draw the line? Where do we draw the line? What is acceptable as different views, and what is unacceptable? I believe that all that endangers the integrity of fullness of life for all goes against God's will. Then it is not a matter of choice but a matter of faith. And it is only through prayer that we are able to find clarity on these matters. Even if answers take a time to reach us. Prayer and communion with God by "abiding in love".

We are living in times of great divisions, be they ethnic, economic, social, gender, environmental, ideological... just look around and we can see disagreement, enmity, bickering. And this happens not only within the boundaries of our own nations, but in the world. Just one example: about 10 countries in the world have access to about 95% of the COVID-19 vaccine and yet, if this virus is rampant in one place, it can affect all places. And of course, we all know of divisions are still existent among churches.

Christian Unity is our calling, and this is not only being able to share the broken bread and the cup, which of course is important; but until we recognize our common shared humanity there is still brokenness that needs urgent tending to. The theme for this week is "**ABIDE in Me**", and what we see is that most of our divisions are based on pushing God out of the centre of life, and living as if we were the centre, and this is when tensions arise and lead us to hatred, intolerance, destruction, selfishness. So, going back to the analogy of the branch and the fruit, it is only when the sap of life runs through us, that the fruit will be also life giving.

There can never be unity in any area of life as long as some believe they have the monopoly of truth, and that those who think differently are wrong. We can go back to the Bible texts on the calling of the disciples: Nathanael supposing nothing good can come from Nazareth. Or the scribes and doctors of the law diminishing the disciples because "what can they know about God?" We can see things in different ways without diminishing our humanity. This goes for what went on in the USofA recently, or what we think of BREXIT in our country. We can disagree, of course, but how do we recognize being part of the family of God?

The notes for the services of this week of prayer remind us that "The start of the journey is an encounter between a human being and God, between the created and the Creator, between time and eternity." And this will not be achieved as long as we try to "go it alone", acting as if we were the centre of the universe. We must see each other as disciples called by God, we may be walking different ways, but in the unity of being grafted together, we can become living fruits for the world we live in here and now. May our prayer be constant, fervent, and simple – even in our humanity, our brokenness, our vulnerability we are never far from God and God is never far from us, and we are never far from each other.

We are called to work for the healing of the nations, not the part we choose, or the part that suits us best - but the whole, as God has chosen. The Bible passage for today ends with these words: "This is my command – Love each other". So be it.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, your entire life was prayer, perfect harmony with the Father. Through your Spirit, teach us to pray according to your will of love. May the faithful of the whole world unite in intercession and praise and may your kingdom of love come. Amen*

Service sheet for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2021