

SUNDAY JANUARY 22, 2012 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Last Wednesday we started a full week of Prayer for Christian Unity, more simply known as the different Christian churches agreeing together to set aside one week for intensive prayer and action. In the first letter to Corinthians St. Paul said, "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ... for it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is that each of you says: I belong to Peter or I belong to Paul, or I belong to Apollo, or I belong to Jesus Christ". Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? How terrible it is that this is something for which we need to pray.

The tragedy of the history of Christianity is that many people through ambitious, selfish disputes divided the Church of Christ. The online World Christian Database has documented over 34 thousand different Christian Denominations. This is a misunderstanding of what Christianity is all about. As St Paul tells us ... "there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord: and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good". Blessed Pope John XXIII, who was 7 years ago beatified by Blessed Pope John Paul II, when he was close to death, prayed to God saying two words: "in Unum" which means "all Christians One".

We know that Jesus left us all the same message in the Garden of Gethsemane. Before He was arrested He said: "Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me"... And it is a message Christians of different denominations profess to believe in: Love God and love each other. In focusing on that message, Christians all over the world have found different ways of fulfilling it. Yet, when we look at each other, we often forget to focus on the endeavour that each is trying to fulfill, and instead we zero in on our differences. History is filled with people from different Christian denominations, looking at each other as heretics, and fighting with - even killing - each other as a result. Instead of looking at each other with love, we have looked at each other with scorn. Instead of realizing that each of us is trying to figure out how best to love God, we have worked at trying to show how other denominations don't have it right, don't follow the way, and don't know the truth.

As people pray today, many of them will be praying that we unite in such a way that all Christians might come to believe in exactly the same thing - one flock and one Shepherd. We are all Christians. St. Paul today tells us that we are all part of the same body, and that body is Christ - Church.

Brothers and sisters it is almost 50 years since the Second Vatican council issued the Document about Ecumenism, and we know it is outrage that the body of Christ and Church are divided. And we see it is more divided. Lack of unity is contrary to the will of Jesus Christ; it is a scandal to the world and it defeats the message of the Holy Gospel - the message of Jesus.

We have many people coming to us as a community this weekend. It is up to us to open our doors to them, as Roman Catholics, and to support them as they look for God here with us. We see this sense of community in all the readings today. What kind of community are we showing these seekers among us? Is it all about us, only as Roman Catholics? Or can we show them that we know that our community is part of the other Christian communities around us? We at Trinity Catholic Church have long been in communication with the other Christian communities in our neighbourhood. Over the next few months we will be able to see the fruits of having looked for commonalities, instead of our differences.

And what about the community outside of the Christian Church? It is interesting that in the first reading today we heard that the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind and did not destroy them. One of the main thrusts of Jesus' message is the commandment to love our neighbour. Yet, this commandment is not only found in Christianity, but in most religions in the world. Taking care of each other, taking each other in, can be found everywhere, including in religions like Buddhism, that don't have a belief in God as part of their convictions. Again, looking at the commonalities, not our differences.

When Mahatma Ghandi was encouraged to become a Christian, out of his mouth came these words; "I know the gospel very well: I read it always and admire it, but I don't see many Christians living according to this beautiful message. Believe me, I love Jesus but I don't like Christians because they are divided and there many different churches."

So let us pray now for Christian unity, and resolve to extend the hand of reconciliation and friendship to our estranged brothers and sisters in the Lord. Lord, hear the prayers of your people and bring the hearts of believers together in your praise and in common sorrow for their sins. Heal all divisions among Christians that we may rejoice in the perfect unity of your Church and move together as one to eternal life in your kingdom. Amen