

Sunday after the Ascension. 13 May 2018. United. John 17:6-19

I stand here alongside another member of the church community.

As you can see we are almost identical.

No? But like Danny DeVito and Arnold Schwarzenegger, we could be twins!

We are completely united, we are as one!

As we enter into this week of prayer for Christian Unity it may be helpful to reflect on what makes us ONE.

Is it some physical characteristic?

Skin colour? height? gender? Physical fitness? All these things might make us feel some affinity with people who are similar to ourselves.

Is it something about educational standard or socio-economic status?

I have a post graduate qualification. What about you? I have a house over my head, food on the table, money in the bank, some investments, the opportunity for some holidays and some luxuries. What about you? Are any of those things true about you?

If yes, then you and I are the same!

Is it ethnic background?

For me that means Scottish and German and a little English heritage all mixed up in me. Is any of that true about you?

If yes then you and I are the same!

Is it having the same likes and interests?

I like classical music, Indian food, wine, photography, bushwalking, travel, languages, people. Are any of those things true about you as well?

If yes then you and I are the same!

Is it having the same political perspective?

I suspect that we have a great diversity of political views here. And that is a good thing. I won't ask you who you voted for in the last election!

Is it having the same commitments and perspective on the world?

I hold as true that all people are equal in the sight of God I also hold as of vital importance that circumstances of life should not determine our response to need and desire to assist those who are in need. I also believe that skin colour, educational background, gender, sexuality, the amount of money we have, the languages we speak and lots of other things which seem to be barriers or seem to define us are really, ultimately not important at all.

Is it being part of the same church community or denomination? Does it matter what church we belong to?

I worship here. In an Anglican Church. I am a Christian. Given where I am at the moment I expect you would all put up your hands for those things. Is it these things which make us ONE?

Jesus prayed that all those who follow him, who listen to him, who are faithful to him, will be one (John 17:11). Not just that, but that we will be one as Jesus and the Father are one!

Jesus prayed for the unity of the Church, that we will be united. In many ways we are the same or similar. Yet in many ways we are very different from one another. So, where do we find our unity?

Our unity comes first of all from something which we don't have. It doesn't come from something which is inside us. It doesn't come first of all from our choices or background or ideas or anything which we might usually associate with our identity.

Our unity comes first of all from how God sees us.

We are all loved by God. We are loved as we are. Not because we are white, or black, or green, or whatever colour. We are not loved because we are rich or poor. We are not loved because we speak English or any other particular language. We are not loved because of our particular gender or sexuality or even for our achievements. Across the span of the last 2000 years all of those characteristics have been raised up as if they were the reason God loves a particular group and loves others less or not at all.

We are loved as we are. We are loved for who we are. And who we are is determined through God's eyes. Is that something we can truly find disagreeable?

Through Eastertide we have been reading through the first letter of John. Today we read a part of the fifth chapter. Back in chapter 4 is a very confronting verse. 1 John 4:20 "Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

There is an African parable which I love which says this beautifully.

The teacher asked, 'how do we know when night has ended and day has begun?' After some time one student said 'It is day, dawn has come, when we can see the horns of the cattle against the sky'. 'No', said the teacher. Another student suggested 'Is it when I can see my hand clearly in front of my face?'. 'No', said the teacher. Yet another student suggested 'Is it when I can hold two hairs in my fingers, one white and one black, and I can tell which is which?' 'No', said the teacher. 'Dawn has come, night is ended when you can look in the face of any man or woman and recognise them as your brother and sister. Until you can do that then it is always night for you.'

Our unity comes as a family in God. And that unity is expressed in respect and cooperation. It shows when we find a common sense of purpose. Jesus prayed that we may all be one so that the world may believe. Disunity, lack of cooperation, lack of respect and tolerance among Christians has been an unfortunate feature of much of Christian history.

Whenever we fall into that way of thinking or speaking or acting we need to ask ourselves how our thoughts and words and actions look from God's perspective.

We will all always be different. Difference does not necessarily mean division though. Look at us here! We are a diverse lot. And thank God for that! Yet we discover week by week, day by day, that our unity in diversity is a blessing. We bring who we are and what we have ... to share.

May that be how we continue to live into the way of being which Jesus prayed for us.

Amen

Paul Mitchell