

WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2011

5 June – 12 June 2011

"One in the Apostles' Teaching, Fellowship, Breaking of Bread and Prayer"

Sermon Notes on Acts 2:42-47

In preparing the sermon/homily the preacher may find some of the following dot points helpful in sparking the imagination. The preacher may want to develop some of these ideas based on the Ac 2:42-47 text in such a way as to address the context of the local congregation. Only the local preacher can tell the stories of your local situation (e.g. the fellowship evident as people came to each other's aid in response to floods, cyclones or fires this year). The sermon/homily could also be a time to acknowledge the ecumenical actions and achievements in the local area.



- We cannot ignore this year the fact that the resources for the Week of Prayer have been prepared by the churches in Jerusalem. This puts us in living contact with the “mother church”, as it were. It provides a context to hear the text of Ac 2:42-47, but especially v.42.
- The churches in Jerusalem have chosen to remind us of the true meaning of the gift of the church given by God, as revealed in Ac 2:42. Through their concrete life and their often precarious situation, they show us how they remember the word of God that speaks of the earliest Christian community. They show us what fidelity looks like in the midst of suffering, injustice and inequality. In a stark way, through their own experience of difference and division, they remind us that the church was born ecumenical, and that to be Christian is necessarily to be vigilant for the unity which is God’s gift and a sign of the salvation won by Christ. They also keep before their eyes that other vision, from the Book of Revelation, of the heavenly Jerusalem. They live in anticipation of the heavenly Jerusalem and they help build it in their own location.
- The text of Ac 2:42 strikes many people as being too idealistic, as though it can never be a reality in our time. This attitude would seem to miss the point of listening to it today. Might this attitude not suggest that we can all too easily read the text as if it primarily about us, as though it were a statement from the world of sociology or organisational theory. Shouldn’t we read it more as a word about God, about God’s plan and about salvation?
- When we read it this way it becomes a fresh word about the unity of the church. It reminds us that the unity of the church does not really have much to do with it being a good organisation or a good institution. Rather it tells us that this community, the church, comes into existence through the action of the Holy Spirit, who inspires the apostolic preaching of the word of God. The unity we hope for is fellowship in the Holy Spirit and therefore fellowship with Christ. This is the source of our own fellowship. Perhaps the churches in Jerusalem today remind us concretely that the unity they pray for is something far greater than peaceful co-existence. It is essentially about their common relationship with God and therefore with each other.
- Lest we think that this does sound a bit idealistic or that its concrete shape may be a little too vague, we should look carefully at the four characteristics of that original

community: they were faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers.

- The teaching of the apostles is what Paul calls the Gospel. It is a word of salvation for all people. This teaching is the foundation of unity. It is only right that we keep testing ourselves to ensure that it is the same faith that we profess.

Already we recognise that our listening together to this word has called us to reconciliation with God and with each. It has also called us to proclaim a message of reconciliation in those areas where there is division in our society. In our hearing of this word we have been reminded that the reconciliation of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians has not yet been completed.

- The second characteristic of the church is fidelity to the fellowship. In the early church this was concretely expressed by the sharing of goods. We recall that Paul took up a collection among the churches of Asia Minor for the church in Jerusalem.

We should not underestimate the importance of Christian fellowship in the ecumenical movement. The unity we long for will not be built solely on theological agreements. There are abundant examples of ecumenical progress being made through the friendships that have developed among people or congregations.

- The third characteristic of the church is fidelity to the breaking of bread. We can't help but think of the pain this causes in many of our ecumenical relationships. Surely, we have to keep expressing sorrow for this state of affairs. Perhaps as we reflect on the reality of this situation it might be important to allow ourselves to acknowledge and feel the pain of our division. Since the celebration of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper is first and foremost a participation in the saving death of Jesus, might not an acknowledgement of the scandal and pain of our present division put us in some sort of communion with the saving death of Jesus. Despite our inability to share sacramental communion might we not in the interim be sustained by this spiritual communion in the suffering of Christ?
- The fourth characteristic of the church is fidelity to the prayers. The earliest experience of prayer was seen as a participation in the prayer of Jesus. Moreover, it was the prayer of the whole community. The occasions we have today to pray together remind us that the unity we already share is quite substantial. We pray together confident that our prayer is heard.
- The first community at Jerusalem embraced different peoples, languages and cultures. The churches in Jerusalem today live in a diverse and complex situation. During the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity this year they can be for us a sort of microcosm of the whole church. The original Jerusalem community gave us a glimpse of what God's saving plan looks like. As the Church they let us see what is possible. Today the churches of Jerusalem remind us that that fidelity to that original gift requires commitment, patience and fidelity on our part. Even when we arrive at that day when the church is once more united in full communion we will still need to pray for unity, lest we lose once again the gift we have received. Indeed, the church was born ecumenical and so the path to unity is always before us.

These sermon notes were prepared by the NCCA Faith and Unity Commission in consultation with the members of the Week of Prayer team in Australia.

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