

WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2020

Sermon/Homily Notes

1. We mark this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in circumstances that we have probably never experienced before. We may not even be able to gather in one place to pray together. We may be participating in a virtual mode. Nevertheless, this time of pandemic makes our prayer this week even more urgent.
2. In the midst of the upheaval and chaos that has taken over our society and our lives, we have also witnessed many examples of creativity and kindness. We have seen signs of national unity that would have seemed unimaginable just six months ago. We have seen local communities reach out to those in need, providing care packages to those who cannot get out, for example, to do their own shopping. We have seen four and five star hotels open their rooms to the homeless. As one hotel manager in Perth said, he treated them like four and five star guests; and, he added, these have been some of the most personally rewarding moments in his career. For those who have eyes to see, there have been so many acts of *unusual kindness*.
3. One way to think of this pandemic is with the image of a boat. There is only one boat, and we are all in it together. True, the image may limp a little, and we know that some are more vulnerable than others, but as a Christian people, it is an image that we might want to hold on to. It is the image given to us by the churches in Malta when they developed the theme of this year's Week of Prayer. The image is of Paul facing shipwreck. The boat acts as a sort of microcosm of the society: Paul and the other prisoners are on the boat; there are the soldiers and the centurion; there are the sailors. There are different layers of society present on that boat. At one point, things have to be thrown overboard, including the cargo and provisions. They abandon all hope of being saved. The sailors try to jump overboard and escape, leaving the boat to perish. Later on, the soldiers decide it would be best to kill the prisoners – seen to be expendable. Paul urges courage and gives everyone a reason to hope. When they eventually manage to get to the safe shores of Malta, the local people welcome them. “They showed us *unusual kindness*”. This is where the theme of this year's Week of Prayer comes from.
4. Even though chosen long before COVID-19, this text is most fitting for us this week. It takes us to the heart of Christianity and to the heart of the life of the Christian people. To be Christian is to be called to show *unusual kindness*.
5. Stories of past epidemics often tell of how the thing that marked the Christian people out was that they valued every life. They made no distinction about who should be saved. Christians stood out for the unlimited love that they showed. They stood out for their *unusual kindness*. A time of pandemic has the capacity to make us look beyond our own communities and to see the wider world. We show love without discrimination to everyone. In this, the words of Jesus in the gospel come to life: “these are the signs that accompany those who believe”.
6. This year in a unique way, while we pray for Christian unity, we also give the world a glimpse of what unity looks like.