

Sermon Notes

These sermon notes are based on the biblical texts presented in the ecumenical worship service: Habakkuk 3:17-19; 1 Corinthians 15:51-58; John 12:23-26. The text from 1 Corinthians has been taken as the central text and the other two have been used to illuminate this text. The following dot points are presented in the hope that the preacher may find something to spark the imagination. Only the local preacher will know the local situation well enough to take these universal ideas and allow them to be interrogated by the experience of the congregation and then in turn to allow the texts to interrogate the local congregation.

- Paul says, “Listen, I will tell you a mystery!”
He then unfolds this mystery as the mystery of what God has done in raising Jesus from the dead. It is summed up in the word “victory”.
This is a story of change: what was perishable has become imperishable; what was mortal is now clothed with immortality. Sin and death have been overcome.
Paul attests to God’s power – and to the transforming power of faith in the risen Christ.
- Paul’s message is counter-intuitive; we are faced with a paradox. But it is the paradox that is at the heart of the Christian gospel.
The grain of wheat must die otherwise it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit.
We have to learn to say, together with the prophet Habakkuk, “Though ... yet...”.
Though the fig tree does not blossom, yet I will rejoice in the Lord.
Only in Christ can we say “yet”. The power of God is our “yet”.
When faced with a long list of disappointments, it is only by faith that can we arrive at the point of saying “yet ...”
- As we pray during this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we do so all too conscious of the division that still exists among us. Perhaps we expected unity many years ago. Perhaps we ask why the churches are not taking steps to put our divisions aside. Some are probably angry that there has not been more progress. We can be impatient. Yet this act of worship reminds us that together we must say “yet”.
- We probably all know that saying “yet” does not necessarily change the situation. But it does remind us that our hope is based on the faith we have in the power of God who raised Jesus from the dead – and from this perspective the situation has indeed been definitively changed.
Without that hope we cannot live with the tension between on the one hand, the power already on display in Christ’s victory and, on the other hand, the existential situation of still fragile human beings who know sin and death.
Our prayer this week has the power to bridge the gap between these two realities. In prayer we join the prophet in saying, “yet ...”
- How do we learn to say “yet”? How do we recognise Paul’s telling of the mystery among us?
We can begin by acknowledging that the power of God is before us as a gift.
This week we are reminded that the mystery of which Paul speaks is unity in Christ: the perishable body puts on imperishability; the mortal body puts on immortality.
In broader Pauline theology this “body” is the body of Christ, the church.

- The unity we pray for is already given as a gift. We don't create it. But we do need to receive it!
- So what does it look like?
The thing we have surely learnt this far along the ecumenical journey is that we need each other – we need each other so that we can recognise the gift that Paul speaks of. Perhaps the challenge of the present ecumenical moment is to *receive* that mystery from each other.
This requires us to be bold and to be humble.
We need to be bold if we are going to receive from another church the mystery of God's power and if we are going to receive the unity of the church as it is already visible in that church. It may look different from what we are used to. In fact we may feel that we are looking with cloudy eyes, and that much of what we see is still hazy. We need to be bold in order to say "though ... yet ...". In the "yet" we open ourselves to receive from the other.
We also need to be humble, because we might see something in the other that we realise is missing in our own church. We need to be humble to own the fact that the mystery Paul speaks of is not as visible in us as we may have thought. We need to be humble to receive from the other this precious insight about ourselves. We need to be humble to stand before God as we are and to say "though ... yet..." In the "yet" the grain of wheat dies in order to bear much fruit.
- During this week we pray that the victory of Christ in which we already share, may transform us so that together we may give witness to the mystery of God's plan of salvation.

Acknowledgement

This resource for Christian unity is based on the international material for the 2012 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which originated with the Churches in Poland, and was agreed by the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity. It has been adapted for use in Australia by the Faith and Unity Commission of the National Council of Churches in Australia.

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