

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

1 – 8 June, 2014

Has Christ been divided?

1 Cor (1:1-17)

Sermon Notes



These sermon notes are based on the biblical texts presented in the ecumenical worship service: Isaiah 57:14-19; Psalm 36:5-10; 1 Corinthians 1:1-17; Mark 9:33-41. The following dot points are presented in the hope that the preacher may find something to spark the imagination

The Bible readings given to us to reflect on this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity speak encouragingly to us of the unity that God seeks for the world and the church.

The readings encourage us to be positive but realistic about seeking unity in the present while at the same time assuring us that God still has a glorious future of perfect unity for us.

The way we deal with the present is to stand on the fact that God's promises of a Saviour and a new time, were fulfilled in the life of Jesus and his proclamation of the kingdom. Jesus and his disciples lived in a world with two competing kingdoms – the Roman empire and the Kingdom of God that was being inaugurated by Jesus. These kingdoms were poles apart in their approach to unity and the way that power was exercised; these differences had a profound effect on how people lived together.

Jesus prayed for the unity of his disciples but they struggled, standing as they did between the competing values of these two kingdoms.

- Peace and unity in the Roman empire was enforced by rule of law, Roman authorities and client kings
 - there were lines of authority that were rigidly enforced
 - most people paid taxes, paid homage to the emperor and were cooperative because they lived under threat of punishment if they did not
- Jesus proclaimed a different kingdom, one where God's values of love, servanthood and forgiveness were the ways of bringing people into cooperative living
- God's kingdom was an upside-down kingdom, where the world's ways were overturned in favour of the lifestyle proclaimed and lived out by Jesus
 - this 'lifestyle' was aptly known as "the way"; John proclaimed Jesus to be 'the way' (John 14.6) and in the book of Acts, living in the kingdom of God is described as "The Way" (eg Acts 9, 19 and 24). . . the way of living in God's kingdom
 - this way of living was foreshadowed in the first reading from Isaiah 57.14 where God spoke of removing the obstacles that prevented his people from living 'the way'

- these two contrasting ways, those of the world and of God, were highlighted by the response of Jesus to an argument amongst the disciples about which of them was the greatest
- Jesus called the disciples to him and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."
- Jesus then took a little child and said to them "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" indicating that childlike qualities are required in the kingdom of God
- child-like qualities alone can drive life in God's kingdom; trust, love, gentleness . . . imagining things differently
- power changes things, and the power of 'the way' of kingdom living is, as psychiatrist Rollo May puts it, the power of "innocence" . . . ability to change through love, trust, receiving and giving
- the exercise of this power builds and maintains unity in the church through servant-living, trust, forgiveness and forbearance
- of course Jesus still had to deal with his slow-learner disciples and he acknowledged the reality of human sin in his patient acceptance of them
- Paul too had to put up with the reality of human sin that diminished the unity of the church in Corinth
- Paul pointed to the power demonstrated in the cross as the power of innocence, the event that enabled unity between God and the world
- any frustration that Paul may have experienced in the worldly behaviour of the Corinthian Christians was tempered by the belief that God has an ideal future of unity that will be ushered in by the return of Jesus (1 Cor 1.7-8)
- the power of the not-yet, God's promise of a new time to come is seen in Isaiah 57.19
- Isaiah had already described in a previous chapter (chapter 11) what this reconciliation will look like . . . a time of complete reversal where weapons of destruction are transformed into tools for producing food and there will be peace between prey and predator . . . Isaiah 11 . . . "and a little child shall lead them"

All three readings thus speak of

- the priority of the future which means that every poor situation is only provisional
- God's faithfulness in fulfilling the promises made to Israel and the world
- the critical importance of the unity based on love and a servant-attitude.

Acknowledgement

This resource use in Australia is based on the international material for the 2014 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The Churches in Canada were invited to prepare the resources these were then agreed to 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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