

WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2016

Sermon Notes

These sermon notes are based on the biblical text from 1 Peter 2.9 and Matthew 5.1-16, presented in the ecumenical worship service. 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.



- In contrast to last year, the liturgy for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has been prepared by the churches of one of the smallest nations on earth. Last year the Week of Prayer material was produced by Brazil, the fifth largest nation by both area and population. This year, 2016, the material is the work of the churches of Latvia, the nation ranked 124th in the world by area and 148th by population.
- The Christian faith first reached what is now Latvia , between the 10th and 12th centuries, some 1,000 years after the disciples were sent into the world by the risen Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The first Christian traditions to bring the faith were the Byzantine and the Roman. Less than 500 years later the Protestant Reformation changed the face of Europe and Lutheran practice came to the capital Riga in the 1600's.
- We are made to be in fellowship and our own being requires that we find our completeness through oneness with others. Without fellowship with God we are always incomplete and there will always be times when we are aware of our lack of something critical. During this week of prayer for Christian unity we affirm that we should always feel incomplete if we do not recognize and celebrate our oneness with those who are in Christ and in a tradition other than our own.
- This week reminds us however that in spite of our divergent traditions that have developed over the centuries through isolation from one another and through conflict, we are called to be a special people through serving. 1 Peter reminds us that we are a special people because of the way that God regards us. Peter uses words like chosen, royal, holy and special when describing who the Church is. These are all descriptors given by God because we exist to be loved by God and to love God.

- Matthew chapter 5 reminds us that we are to be special through our commitment to serving the world through building God's kingdom. Matthew says that we do this through peacemaking, mercy, humility, trusting in God's provision and being hope-bearers. We are called to live not for ourselves but as 'salt' and 'light' to improve the world. This reminds us of the very early slogan of the Life and Work Movement, one of the bodies formed after the foundational ecumenical meeting in Edinburgh in 1910 . . . "doctrine divides, service unites".
- We are reminded during this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity that when we focus on our basic call from God, we will be united in our service of God's kingdom through voluntary participation in human community. A Polish professor being interviewed on ABC radio a few years ago spoke sadly of the tendency to privatized living that had crept into his country since the fall of communism. People who had been forced to participate in community life for so long had, when given a choice, chosen to withdraw to a large extent. He said that fewer people were attending football matches – they watched at home on TV; fewer people drank together in pubs but took their alcohol home to drink alone; fewer people attended mass and some of those stayed home watching religious programs on TV. In order to maintain a healthy society made up of emotionally, socially balanced people, there needs to be a good balance of social life and private life. It must be a chosen balance. The basis of healthy participation however is choice, voluntarism; this is as important for larger social groupings as it is for individuals.
- Voluntarism is a key aspect of being the special people, the Church. We are members because we choose to be. We are invited to live in committed love and service to one another; it must not be forced upon us. Our Lord was not forced to serve God but developed his identity through chosen loving service in redeeming the world; the world came to know him through his choice of incarnation and the cross. So, we the Church must be known in our choice to live as servants in the kingdom of God, and revealers of God. In this way we become the new community described by Peter and Matthew and exemplified by the Christian Church in Latvia.
- During the Second World War and in the decades following, the Latvian people lived under totalitarian anti-Christian ideologies – atheistic Nazism and Communism. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Christians experienced a unity in common witness to the Gospel, and suffered persecution as a result. In their shared service they discovered the truth that "service unites".
- During this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we are invited and challenged to discover this truth for ourselves.