

**Sermon preached by the Rev'd. Cynthia Jackson, St. Mary's
Wimbledon, 3rd Sunday of Epiphany, 22nd January 2017.**

Today is the middle Sunday of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This year too is the 500 anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation in Europe, dated from Martin Luther's 95 Theses protesting against the practice of indulgences, on 31 October 1517 at Wittenberg. You may have read the statement put out by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in connection with this Reformation anniversary. You can read it on the Church of England website.

The Archbishops write that the Reformation was a process of both renewal and division amongst Christians in Europe. The Reformation contributed to many blessings such as the clear proclamation of the gospel of grace, the availability of the Bible to all in their own language and the recognition of the calling of laypeople to serve God in the world and in the church.

Nevertheless we can also see how much damage occurred over the last 500 years to the unity of the church, as the Archbishops state, in clear defiance of the clear command of Jesus Christ to unity in love. Over a long period of time Christian people battled against each other, many suffered persecution and even death at the hands of others claiming to know the same Lord. This legacy of mistrust and competition would then accompany the astonishing global spread of Christianity in the centuries that followed.

The Archbishops call on all Christian's to seek to be renewed and united in the truth of the Gospel of Christ through participation in the Reformation Anniversary, to repent of divisions, and, held together in Him, to be a blessing to the world in obedience to Jesus Christ. Pope Francis too made a similar statement when he met members of the Lutheran Church last autumn praying for forgiveness for the divisions of the past and praying for the Lutheran and Catholic churches to work together towards unity.

As we study the readings from Paul's letter to the Corinthians and the Gospel passage from Matthew we can see that even in the early days of the church there were disagreements and difficulties.

Jesus was fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah. He was the Messiah that the people of Israel long for, to rid their country of oppressive foreign rulers. But Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven, not an earthly kingdom

based on earthly power but a kingdom based on the love of God. Jesus was not talking about a heavenly kingdom that people would reach after death, no, Jesus was talking about a kingdom here on earth founded on different values. To attain this kingdom Jesus called people to repentance which means a change of direction. It is not just being sorry for our personal sins but to have a complete about turn. We can only do this today by letting the grace and love of God flow into hearts. Jesus was bringing light, and still brings light, into the dark places of the world, love where there was hate.

How could the disciples understand this new teaching? They often got it wrong and even quarrelled among themselves about who should be the greatest. Jesus reminded them that whoever wished to be great among them must be their servant and whatever wished to be first among them must be their slave. Not the words the disciples wanted to hear!

Paule writes to the Christians in Corinth

“...Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there is no division among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose...” (1.Cor. 1:10)

In today's reading Paul continues to write about the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God. It is surprising that Jesus did not choose educated men steeped in the Jewish laws and scriptures to be his disciples but he chose e.g. Andrew and Peter, fishermen, and Matthew a tax collector. Men regarded as Paul, writes *'as foolish from a worldly perspective'*. But Jesus was not looking at his ministry from an earthly perspective but from God's perspective.

Paul's purpose was to proclaim the Gospel of Christ to the world. That is the purpose of the church today with its many Denominations. We are all united by our common Baptism. The purpose of this church of St. Mary is to worship God and to proclaim the Gospel of Christ to the world. We may enjoy arranging flowers, singing in the choir, teaching in the Sunday school, attending groups, but the centre of our activity here at St Mary's has to focus on the person of Jesus Christ.

Our witness to Christ in Wimbledon will be all the greater if we work in co-operation and harmony with other Christian denominations. It is a pity that there is no North Wimbledon Council of Churches in this part of Wimbledon. Many of you, like me will have friends from other denominations, two of my best friends are Methodist and Catholic,

another friend is a Quaker. The current Southwark Spiritual Direction Course for training new Spiritual Directors is ecumenical. The participants come from Anglican, Baptist, and Catholic Churches, a Quaker meeting, and an Evangelical Mission Centre. What a lot we have learnt from one another and how rich our morning and evening worship has been as a result. We have learnt to respect our differences but rejoice in the fact that at the centre of all our worship is the person of Jesus Christ.

So let us rejoice in the progress that has been made in the last century to a greater working together of all Christian denominations. The founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948 gave a fresh impetus for churches worldwide to observe the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This year's theme is '*Crossing Barriers*' based on 2 Corinthians 5: 14-20. I will end by quoting some verses:

"...If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God... (2 Cor.5: 18 -20)

It seems very appropriate that '*Crossing Barriers*' with the theme of reconciliation should be the theme for this year's Week of Prayer for Christianity Unity when there is so much dis-unity and dis-harmony in the world. We only have to look at countries such as Syria, Iraq and Turkey, to name but a few. Also we see demonstrations in the USA following the swearing in of Donald Trump as President. We see too in our own country the continuing sometimes acrimonious debates following '*Brexit*'.

What challenges we have today, as Christians here in Wimbledon, to work together, in whatever sphere we are placed, for reconciliation, unity and peace. Amen.