

‘Is Christ Divided?’

A Service of the Local Ecumenical Partnership: St. Mary’s, St. Bartholomew’s, & Wheatley URC at St. Mary the Virgin Church of England, Wheatley during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 19 January, 2014

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Isaiah 57:14-19

1 Corinthians 1:1-18

Any of you who pay attention to the news will have been unable to escape the recent reports of the French President’s alleged love affair. Earlier this week, a colleague of mine mused aloud to me as he pored over the newspaper, “I wonder why we’re so taken up by this story? Why are people so interested in the private affairs of politicians—and why are we always so surprised when people in power cheat on their partners, as if they’re any different from so many other human beings?”

From my perspective, there’s *no* wonder why people are captivated by this story. We all know that relationships matter—especially relationships of implicit or explicit partnership, where covenants of fidelity have been made. We know that relationships are hard work, even with people we love. And, although most individuals are faithful to their spouse, according to a study reported in the January 1st, 2014, issue of the Associated Press *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 74% of men and 68% of women polled said they *would* have an affair if they knew they would never get caught.¹ So at the very least, a majority of people, at one time or another, entertain fleeting thoughts of two-timing their life-partner. Thankfully, most don’t; according to the same study, only 22% of men and 14% of women admit to adulterous liaisons during their married life—although a total of 41% of all the marriages surveyed had one or both spouses admit to either physical or emotional infidelity.²

My aim is not to throw lots of marriage statistics at you this morning. It is to get us thinking about what’s required in life-giving relationships of unity and faithfulness.

From before the start of history, human beings have known the struggle and sacrifice required in relationships of fidelity.

Throughout the Bible, countless references are made to God’s people being unfaithful partners, individuals with eyes and hearts that are constantly on the prowl for something different, something that at least *appears* to be more exciting or immediately gratifying. God is portrayed time and again as the betrayed lover, as the longsuffering partner who cannot seem to stop the spousal cuckoldry.

The passage we heard from the prophet Isaiah this morning started at verse 14 of Chapter 57. The preceding thirteen verses that we *didn’t* hear, are full of exasperation and contempt for the ways that the Israelites keep giving in to the seduction of more intoxicating gods and lifestyles, disregarding time and again their covenant of faithfulness to the LORD God.

1 <http://www.statisticbrain.com/infidelity-statistics/>

2 Ibid.

And it's not only the ones who indulge in the infidelity that wind up getting hurt; those endeavouring to remain faithful and devoted to the sacred union also suffer—perhaps even more greatly—as well.

With that backdrop, listen again to verses 18 and 19 of our Old Testament reading, and see if the grace and forgiveness expressed don't sound that much more amazing and generous: "I have seen their ways," says the LORD, "but I will heal them; I will lead them and repay them with comfort, creating for their mourners the fruit of the lips. Peace, peace, to the far and the near," says the LORD; "and I will heal them." (Isa. 57:18-19)

From the beginning, God's people have been aware of how fickle we are, how prone to wander, how willing to squander precious relationships for the sake of a thrill, how hell-bent our hearts are on selfish things. And that's because selfish pursuits and short-term pleasures are so much easier to claim *right now*: we have a void that wants filling, and these things promise to satisfy. But they don't—at least, not in a lasting way. The profound unity and peace that our spirits are clamouring for requires patient devotion and a generous spirit that keeps working at the relationship, even when it feels frustrating, lacklustre, full of misunderstanding, sometimes even hopeless. That, at least, is the example God gives throughout the pages of Scripture, from the very beginning in God's relationship with us.

Today, we pray with churches all over the world for the blessing of Christian Unity. From the earliest days, Christ's Church has known division and fractiousness.

God, in a demonstration of consummate unity, came to us as one of us in the person of Jesus Christ, so that we might see how it's done: how ultimate unity with God and with each other is accomplished.

And yet, reading Paul's letter to those early believers in Corinth, Greece, we can see that from the very beginning, Christians have struggled to agree, to say nothing of practising unity. Some aligned themselves with Apollos, others with Paul, and still others with Cephas (a.k.a. Peter). There you have it: first-century denominationalism.

"What's going on here?!" Paul asks. "Has Christ been divided?"

We human beings have an infinite range of ideas, and experiences, and ways of expressing ourselves with respect to how God is encountered and known—and we tend to feel drawn to communities of like-minded people whose experience is similar to our own. This is a gift; it's a God-given gift.

But that gift is quickly abused when we start to think that *our* community's way of understanding and doing things, or our personal convictions and practises, are God's *preferred* way—as if the mind of God is not equally disclosed in another way of understanding or doing things, even if it's beyond our ability to comprehend it.

There's an ancient Indian fable which was translated into the English language in a 19th-century poem written by John Godfrey Saxe that goes like this:

Blind Men and the Elephant

*It was six men of Indostan
to learning much inclined,*

*Who went to see the Elephant (though all of them were blind)
That each by observation
might satisfy his mind.*

*The First approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall
against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
“God bless me! but the Elephant is very like a wall!”*

*The Second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, “Ho! What have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me ‘tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!”*

*The Third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
“I see,” quoth he, “The Elephant
Is very like a snake!”*

*The Fourth reached out an eager hand,
And felt about the knee.
“What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain,” quoth he;
“‘Tis clear enough the Elephant Is very like a tree!”*

*The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: “E’en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!”*

*The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant
Is very like a rope!”*

*And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,*

And all were in the wrong!

MORAL:

*So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!*

Blind Men and the Elephant is a useful fable/poem, because we can all recognise how silly each blind individual was in their insistence that their perspective on the subject was definitive. If only all of them would practise humility and combine their collective observations, each one would surely have come to a deeper and fuller understanding of the one unified being that each of them was describing in part! It's a wonderful parable about religious experience in general—and instructive for our Christian churches in particular.

Has Christ been divided, in spite of a divine call and desire for oneness?

The apostle Paul, a little bit further on in his first letter to the Corinthians, likens the whole community of Christians to the human body—he calls them (us) “The Body of Christ, and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:27). We share the same Spirit, and collectively represent the animated, resurrected body of Jesus Christ. What's more, he announces that as followers of Jesus, “[W]e have the mind of Christ.” (1 Cor.2:16b)

And that, of course, is the rub. Because if we really *do* have the mind of Christ, then *how can* we be so divided? Indeed, how can we hold completely opposing positions on matters ranging from how members ought to be baptised, to who ought to receive the Eucharist, to questions of authority and church structure, to the meaning of salvation?

Most of our answers—and the discrepancy among them—will be rooted in our interpretation of Scripture. But how are we to determine whose approach to, or interpretation of Scripture is closest to the heart and mind of God?

As in the experience of the six blind men, what is ultimately lacking is a spirit of humility and a willingness to do the difficult work of digging still deeper, of listening carefully, respectfully, responding with love and care, and exploring with genuine curiosity what points of connection might be found. For surely there, *there* in the nexus of our agreement, is the more likely place that confidence in the mind of God might be claimed or appropriate.

Despite our divisions, most Christians—I daresay most of us here—would agree that we are called to be united, despite our inability to reach uniformity of perspective or conviction on various matters. Certainly, it's the divine challenge put to us in Paul's letter.

But how do we accomplish that, when so much of the ecumenical fire that existed in the latter 1900s seems to have dwindled? Whereas there was once a spirited vision for broad reunification across many denominations in this country, the energy toward that end seems to have waned, replaced by a sense of anxiety about decline in all the churches, alongside a fear of losing the unique identity, history, and deeply-held convictions that led to our individuality in the first place.

But perhaps we don't need to envisage a re-union of denominations in order to practise unity with integrity. Perhaps we need to think about embodying a more organic sort of unity . . . an accord that emerges from shared experiences and mission endeavours, like jointly supporting a local food bank; or combining efforts to provide for outreach to the youth and young people in our community; putting on community festivals; and volunteering our time to provide a week-long holiday club with Christian values at their core.

It may sound like I'm just patting us all on the back here in Wheatley—and I am, a little bit! I think it's important to celebrate where we see God at work. But there's plenty more still to be done. The more we invite one another to share in ventures that express our faith and values; the more attentively we watch for and celebrate the presence of God in our midst despite our differences; the more we practise living out our relationship with God and invite others to join us, the more surely our mutuality and unity in Christ will grow and flourish.

When, as individuals and congregations, we devote ourselves foremost to being faithful to God, and when we manifest that fidelity as partners in Christ's ministry of love and reconciliation, then the world around us will stop accusing us of hypocrisy, because there is no hypocrisy in love.

Both within the Church, among the churches, and beyond Church boundaries, there are individuals, couples, and entire families suffering the destructive forces of infidelity. The only thing that can begin to heal those wounds of division is the infinite grace of God—and that divine grace being expressed by human beings, in ways that display the forbearing, self-sacrificing, forgiving, ever-loving Spirit of God.

Let us pray, avail, and commit ourselves to be vessels of that Spirit, here in Wheatley—and in all the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.