

Text of homily for the Third Sunday of Ordinary Time 2017, by Archbishop Peter Smith

Sunday 22nd January 2017

Sunday during the week of Prayer for Christian Unity

8:10am Mass, St George's Cathedral, Southwark, broadcast live by BBC Radio 4

"I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, for the sake of Our Lord Jesus Christ, to make up the differences between you and instead of disagreeing among yourselves, to be united in your belief and practice."¹

In this week of prayer for Christian unity it's a sobering thought that those words of St. Paul to the Church in Corinth in the middle of the first century remind us that even in its earliest days, the Church suffered dissension and differences. Even then, so close to the resurrection of Christ, there were conflicts between the truth proclaimed by Christ and preached by the Apostles, and the worldly 'wisdom' of some of the first believers. That historical fact challenges us to be realistic and to avoid any sentimentality or pseudo-piousness in thinking that the early years of the Church's foundation were a 'golden age' when the first Christian communities already lived a life of perfection. Sadly, over the centuries that history has been repeated to a greater or lesser extent time after time.

I still vividly remember as a young lad in the early 1950's, hearing a rather fearsome nun telling us youngsters, that it was gravely sinful to enter a Protestant church! Boys being boys, how did we respond to that? We searched out the nearest church and dared each other to go in. Two of us did, just across the threshold, and then jumped back onto the pavement, and were mightily relieved when we weren't struck down by a thunderbolt or suffered any other ill effects. Thank God we've come a very long way since those days!

For the Catholic Church the radical change came when Pope John XXIII in January 1959 announced his intention to call an Ecumenical Council with, among other things, the desire *"to invite the separated Communities to seek again that unity for which so many souls are longing in these days throughout the world."* Today we thank God that following the Pope's initiative, we've come a very long way on the journey to reconciliation and unity, and it's especially appropriate this year which marks the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's German Reformation; the first time in all those years that the Reformation is being commemorated in a truly ecumenical age.

¹ From the Second Reading at Mass: 1 Corinthians 1:10-13,17

But we can still be tempted, from time to time, to wonder if our striving for the unity for which Christ prayed will ever come about. What we need to remember is that enormous progress has been made since the Second Vatican Council. Sometimes we do forget, and then we allow the difficulties of our journey together to get us down. We wonder perhaps whether it's all worth the effort and the frustration, the misunderstanding and the hurt which we have inflicted on each other down through the centuries – not so much through malice, please God, but through pride, blindness, and sometimes, simply through human weakness.

So today, we give thanks that over the past 50 years we've come to recognise much more clearly that what unites all baptised Christians is far greater than what divides us. Trust and fruitful relationships have grown hugely among Christian communities, through patient dialogue and common action in working together. In coming to know each other better, many misunderstandings and prejudices have been overcome. Having said that, our ecumenical journey towards full visible communion still continues today; a journey in obedience to the prayer of Jesus Christ that we should be one "so that the world may believe." We recognise more clearly now, that what unites us is far greater than what divides us; that we can and do work together to fulfil the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, caring for the poor, the sick and the vulnerable members of society, upholding the rights of prisoners and others who have no voice in society. We can, and must do that, because Christianity doesn't exist for its own sake but for the sake of humanity. It has a public mission which must never be simply in safeguarding itself, but in enhancing and developing the common good, the growth, development and flourishing of society in the light of our common dignity as human beings.

Pope Francis has stressed that Christian unity "*is a gift from on high*", an essential requirement of our faith, a journey of personal and community conversion to the will of Christ. Remember, he said, "*that when we work, pray and serve the needy together, we are already united.*" Today we give thanks to God for that gift and ask for the gift of his grace and presence as we continue our journey together to ever closer communion, with humility and patience, determination and hope, trusting that our loving Lord will be walking with us every step of the way, since, if Christ lives in our hearts, we know that "*The people that lived in darkness have seen a great light.*"