

Sermon - Sunday 11 July 2021: Barrowden and Zoom.

Unity.

‘God’s plan... to unite all things in Christ’. Ephesians 1.10.

A young curate once asked Archbishop Ramsey what he should preach about. “Preach about God and preach about 20 minutes”, was the archbishop’s reply. So, it is God today, not Wimbledon or cup finals, though both might get a mention!

Unity

Our scripture passage this morning (Eph. 1. 3 – 14) pours out of Paul as if he were an excited and breathless young child telling us something special. In the original Greek, the whole passage is just one sentence! And this message is important: Christ is the unifying factor for the whole world. All things find their home and meaning in and through Christ!

I have a grandson who is similarly seized by his passion for litter-picking. It is almost an obsession if it were not for his wide-ranging knowledge of the recycling process. From an early age he would rush around the garden, or the park or the aircraft picking up litter, especially cigarette stubs. All went into the litter bin. It was hard work taking him for a walk!

St. Paul is also passionate to show us that all things belong ‘in Christ’: not just male and female, black and white. His vision is greater than that. This vision covers heaven and earth, the natural world (where we are just realising our responsibilities). But it goes even further. He is talking about the internal harmony of us humans – the sins we love and hate simultaneously – but also the greatest test of harmony, the relationship between God and humanity – a unity which has been sliding away from us in the past century.

There is an irony in all of this. Paul was writing this letter to the Ephesian Church from Rome where he was in prison. He must have been seized by this vision of unity in his prison cell. He knew much about the Roman world and how it had

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brought together many warring cities, states and nations. He was proud of his Roman citizenship and realized that Rome and the *Pax Romana* was actually creating the unity to which he was being directed. If fallible Roman Emperors could bring about such change, then the power of Christ and his Church could achieve even more!

Our Vocation

This is some agenda! It certainly needs divine intervention to address it – and that is what we have but God has called us to attend to it as well as himself.

‘Christ has no other hands but your hands to do his work today.

No other hands but your hands to guide men on their way.

No other lips but your lips to tell them why he died;

No other love but your love to win them to his side’. (St. Theresa)

And how do we do it? Well, step by step would be a start.

I used to regularly visit the ecumenical centre of Taizé in France which is visited by thousands of enquiring young people each year from all over the world. There are few rules but visitors must attend worship 3 times a day. As the crowds approach the rather ugly hanger-like church, young people hold placards in a variety of languages urging silence. The church is called The Church of Reconciliation and the dominant element in the worship is silence. Perhaps that is where we should start, in silence, seeking God’s direction or affirmation.

There is an excitement in the way Paul writes about this calling. It matches the excitement of Emma Raducanu, the A level student who was a wildcard player at Wimbledon this year. Although she withdrew, her sheer delight in being chosen was obvious.

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We did not choose God; God chose us and sometimes our delight matches that choice. Joy is infectious. It is a response to our calling and makes our work of reconciliation easier.

Through our baptism, says St. Paul, we are both holy and blameless. How does that work? Well, holiness suggests difference, the difference which following Christ inevitably brings. As one bishop neatly put it, *'It's not that Christianity makes good men better but whether it can make bad men holy'*. But who can be blameless in this world? It relates to sacrifice: only the best being offered to God. Aiming for that in all departments of our life will help us in our calling as reconcilers.

Reconciliation

So, our calling is to be reconcilers in different directions. I have spent some time baby-sitting in the last few weeks. Some of us are gifted in this way; others are not! I hugely admire the way a mother or grand-mother manages to distract a grumpy child back to happiness, reconciled to itself.

Think if you will of the reconciling work of Marcus Rashford. He used his influence to speak truth to power by encouraging the Prime Minister to extend the provision of free school meals during the COVID crisis. Each of us is in a position of influence too. How will you use your influence to encourage reconciliation? It may be in the direction of the green agenda, race relations, healing family rifts, engagement in regional politics or acting as an evangelist, bringing someone closer into the reach of God's caring hand. We all have this responsibility as Christians. It is both a privilege and a challenge.

The work of unity is too important to be left to the clergy or politicians. It must involve us all, at whatever level we can reach. Amen.