

Preaching at Unity Payer Service at St Mark's 3rd Sunday 2023

Words of wisdom: *"There's a fine line between a long, drawn-out sermon and a hostage situation."*

The theme for Christian Unity this year is ***Be-longing: Praying for unity in an unjust world***. It focuses on the tragedy into which society falls because of racism which causes division, foments hatred, destroys trust and leads to people acting inhumanely towards each other.

The key focus, however, is ***belonging***. Covid has taught us many lessons. The isolating effects of the disease prevented us visiting our loved ones and even our families for fear of spreading the disease. It brought home the importance of being together, not just on a phone, even phones with video, but together in person.

In the early days of ecumenism, the different Christian denominations met seeking to outline their strengths and understandings of Christianity in the hope that the others would agree and conform. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit, the source of wisdom, had other ideas. This Spirit of God opened up a new way of encounter that began with ***listening***, truly listening to other denominations, but listening with a desire not only to learn but in a way that helped each denomination enrich and deepen its understanding of faith. In this way the churches came to realise that they had far, far more in common than they had differences. Misunderstandings were clarified and false myths laid to rest. This led to a desire to work and pray together especially around issues that concerned the whole community.

Jesus calls us ***salt and light*** for whom reconciliation is essential for our faith. Isaiah calls us to treat others justly in an active way by fighting for the rights of the poor, the defenceless and the marginalised not because it is a duty but out of love. They are our brothers and sisters. The justice mentioned today is about caring for family, the Christian family, which, as our readings make clear, concerns everybody without exception. Paul also makes clear that it is God who builds up this family. Recognised as a Temple of God, God is the one who leads us into greater Unity.

As we reflect on Christian Unity, we can take comfort in the knowledge that there is far greater unity among grass-root members of our churches than Church leaders admit. There is a growing belief that we all ***belong together under Christ***. God makes clear that we are accepted and welcomed, warts and all, whatever our imperfections. God reaches out to embrace us as we are with a love beyond understanding. The greater our sense of belonging, the greater our desire to welcome and value anyone and everyone we encounter. This leaves no room for discrimination, hatred or rejection of others. This sense of belonging that we have nurtured and developed in Hitchin forcefully militates against injustice.

What other injustices do we face?? Climate injustice????

The Unity Week Booklet points out that: *"To seek justice is to create space for God's just ordering and enduring wisdom in a world too often unmoved by suffering. And yet, there is joy in doing what is right. There is joy in affirming that **"Black Lives Matter"**, that **Refugees and Asylum seekers** are our brothers and sisters, as we actively pursue justice for God's oppressed, dominated, and exploited loved ones. There is power in giving in to wisdom's call for justice, and in doing it as a Church together, as one Christian family.*

CAGED BIRD Maya Angelou a civil rights activist who worked with Dr Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. B 1928

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

Maya Angelou was

And finally:

Fr Bryan Massingale, a world leading social ethicist and scholar in racial justice, shares with us his hope and challenge:

*“Social life is made by human beings.
The society in which we live
is the result of human choices and decisions.
This means that human beings can change things.
What humans break, divide and separate,
we can with God’s help,
also heal, unite and restore.
What **is** now - does not have to be.
Herein lies **the hope and the challenge.**”*

Timmy didn’t want to put his money in the offering plate on Sunday morning, so his mother decided to use some hurried creative reasoning with him.

“You don’t want that money, Timmy,” she whispered in his ear. *“Quick! Drop it in the plate. It’s tainted!”* Horrified, Timmy obeyed.

After a few seconds he whispered, *“But, mommy, why was the money tainted? Was it dirty?”*
“Oh dear, NO” she replied. *“It’s not really dirty. It just ‘taint yours’ and ‘taint mine,’”* she replied.
“It’s God’s!!”