

*St. Aidan's West Epping, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2020*

## “THE CHURCH – UNITY, GIFTS AND MINISTRY”

**(Deuteronomy 8:5-14; Psalm 125; Ephesians 4:1-16; Matthew 5:1-12)**

On Australia Day there is much for us to be thankful for. We live in a country which is prosperous, democratic, and far from war and oppression. Of course, that is not the whole story. Australia has its problems, including the range of natural disasters to which our people are exposed at times: drought, bushfire, floods and the rest. However, these calamities often bring out the best in our people, with practical and financial generosity to those in great need.

Australia Day means different things to different people. For some it is a day of celebration and thankfulness. For some it is a day for people to get together, whether it is in big community celebrations, or times with family and friends. For some of course it is simply a welcome Public Holiday after a hot January, and before the kids go back to school.

Australia Day is surely meant to draw people together, to strengthen our unity. And that is one of its weaknesses. To most Anglo Australians, we are reminded of the beginning of modern Australia, with the founding of a convict colony which became a great nation. But of course to our indigenous people, it commemorates what **they** experienced as an **invasion**, bringing violence, fear, alcohol, disease, death and for many, the loss of hope.

Whether we need to change the date of Australia Day is something worth seriously considering, but the conversation will require patience and understanding and respect from people with their different views. And sadly, one of the trends of modern political life today is the pattern of dividing people rather than bringing them together: the tendency for politicians and leaders to shout their ideas rather than to seek to respectfully persuade people, and their readiness to put down those with whom they disagree. The trend in today's world is sadly towards division rather than unity and understanding. And we see that in the life of our own country. We need to continue praying for our leaders, that they will see that humility is an important aspect of the exercise of power. After all, no one knows everything, nobody has it all together, nobody is perfect.

We live in a country with people from a wide range of backgrounds: different families' country and culture, people's character and strengths, their aspirations and their political ideas, and of course their faith and beliefs, or their lack of faith. If we ever could realistically call Australia a Christian country, we certainly cannot do so today. And one of the struggles for the church is to find its rightful place in the life of our country where the word of any church leaders can be questioned and often rejected.

I would love to see a greater unity, a **healthy** unity within our country, a unity which is not simply an enforced uniformity: a unity which acknowledges the diversity of our people, which shows respect to all people, and which encourages all of us to make our contribution to the common good.

Of course, it is not only in our nation that I would like to see a deepening unity. I would like to see it in the church. And **unity** is at the heart of this morning's reading from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. Church unity has been a big issue for many generations. Some people are concerned by the many denominations and want to see them combined into one big church. That may be a great ideal, but looking at the history of the church, I think that is an aspiration with its own risks. However it is not the primary issue here and now. And in any case, that sort of church unity is about churches as **institutions**, and I think the real issue of church unity for us is about **community and relationship**, rather than organization. I would love to see many more places developing the sort of ecumenical connections we have in Epping.

In Paul's day there were no denominations. There were churches, often small communities of believers, united by their faith in Christ. In some cities and towns there may have been a number of these "house churches". And when Paul wrote his letters he was seeking to help the members of these small churches to learn how to live as Christ's followers.

He also recognized that church unity was not just a **goal** that each church should be striving for. It was Christ's **prayer** for his church, and it is in fact Christ's **gift** to his church. And so Paul doesn't ask his readers to **achieve** unity, but to **maintain** the unity of the Spirit: to hold on to our unity in Christ.

Christ's church is his **family**. And we know that families have their divisions and squabbles, but they are still family. That is true as we think about the various denominations. And it is true for the wider Anglican Church, as it is for any congregation. If we lead lives that are indeed worthy of Christ's call to us, we will relate to one another and to our fellow Christians, whoever they may be, in a way which expresses our unity in Christ.

Paul spells out the sort of qualities which will foster that unity: humility, gentleness, patience and forbearance. If we relate to each other like this, our church and any church will grow in its experience of Christ's unity.

And of course, unity does not mean uniformity: Christians are not cardboard replicas of one another. The church is for people of different backgrounds and colours, different stories and experiences, different personalities and abilities. It is not only for "people just like me".

The church is also for people who have different understandings on particular issues: it **does** of course matter what we **believe**, but there are areas where Christians may have different understandings because the scriptures do not give exact answers to every question people might think of.

We are one **in Christ**: as Paul says, there is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism – even if there are different traditions about baptism; and there is one God and Father of us all.

But all of us are members of God’s family. We are members individually **and** together of the body of Christ. And we all have a **role** in that body. Hence Paul writes about the gifts God has given to us as members of the body. “Each of us was given grace,” he writes. It was Christ’s **gift** to his people. And what were Christ’s gifts? Paul first mentions **apostles, prophets, and evangelists**: people who travelled around as witnesses to Christ, who spoke God’s message in a special way, and who effectively preached the Gospel, leading people to faith in Christ. We don’t have these people in the same way today, but there are certainly servants of Christ who seem to have a ministry which reflects something of these ministries: church planters and leaders, people who have special insight into God’s message, people who communicate the message of Christ in special ways.

But Paul goes on to mention **pastors and teachers**. He linked these two terms together, indicating that he saw a primary role of the pastors of churches in teaching the people, helping them to learn and understand God’s truth, and to see how it works in our lives.

Of course, communicating God’s truth is still at the heart of the pastor’s role today. Pastors don’t go to business college, but to theological college, where we study the scriptures in depth, so that we know and understand God’s message as well and as clearly as possible. What we seek to learn and then to teach is not meant to be our own ideas, but **God’s** message.

What is the purpose of all this? According to Paul, we pastors are “to equip God’s people for the work of ministry.” This is so important. My task is to help you to be people who minister to one another, and who may minister even beyond the church community.

But let’s be clear about who is to **do** the ministry. It is not the Rector or the clergy who are actually “the ministers”. In a parish where I was a student minister, the front of the bulletin identified key people in the congregation. It said “Ministers: all the congregation. Assistant to the Ministers: The Rector”. The Rector at that church was picking up Paul’s point in this passage. **All** Christians are called to be ministers, not just the clergy.

We all have a ministry, and in a sense my job is not to “do the ministry” for you, but to encourage and to do what I can to guide and equip you so that you can carry out your own ministries.

The church does not function like a bus where the driver does it all, so that everyone can go to sleep, or look out of the window, or read, or play with their mobile phone! The church is much more like an old-style football team with a player-coach: I’m actually out on the field with you, but we **all** have to play our parts wholeheartedly and co-operatively if we are going to be successful. It would be hopeless if the team told the captain-coach: “You’re the expert. **You** play the game for us. We’ll come along and watch from the stands.” On the contrary, we all have a ministry to contribute.

Now Paul here only mentions those five ministries of leadership and communication. But if we looked at his other letters, especially 1 Corinthians, we would be reminded that in an effective church, a wide range of gifts is needed. Whether our gifts are in communication or organisation or hospitality or generous giving or friendship or prayer, or simply ways we can be helpful, there are ways that we all can contribute to the health of our church.

Paul says that the church is like a body with its great variety of body parts: for good health, every part of our body needs to be working well. For our health as a church, we **all** need to be contributing in our different ways. Working together in a committed way, we express and strengthen that unity that we have as members of Christ’s family.

Of course, spiritual health is not just about the ways we help, or the kindness we show. Paul says that we need to act in love **and** speak the truth. Our liturgies are designed to keep us in touch with the truth. Our readings and sermons are meant to help us grow in our knowledge of the truth, as are the various groups which meet for fellowship and study of the scriptures.

For we all need to **grow** together in our relationship with Christ our Lord and Saviour. That will help us not to be led down false paths because an impressive but self-deluded preacher comes along with his own message, rather than the truth of the scriptures.

The challenge to any church is to grow spiritually, as well as to reach out with God’s love and God’s Gospel, so that there may also be the possibility of numerical growth. It mightn’t always happen, but it is far more likely to happen when visitors come along and “see how these Christians love one another”. Love means serving. It expresses our unity as we use our different gifts. Let’s then be servants of one another, using the opportunities we have, the gifts we have, to serve one another in love. Amen. *Paul Weaver*