

Christ Church, Georgetown
Sermon, Epiphany 3, Sunday, January 22, 2017
The Rev. Timothy Cole
Mat 4: 12-23, 1 Cor 1:10-18, Is 9:1-4

Well that was, I suppose, the weekend that was! I think that if anyone had said to Lorraine and me last Epiphany that this is where we would be on the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany in 2017 we would have been hardly likely to believe them.

So what, if anything, should a preacher, and a foreigner for that matter, say in such an atmosphere of division and passionate intensity?

Well, I wonder if the fact that we meet today in the very middle of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity might have something for us to reflect on that may help us place these things in the context of our faith and our allegiance to the name that is above every name and the cause that should be above every cause in our lives.

The Men's Group is reading C S Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, which are the very amusing but at times disturbing letters from a senior Devil, Screwtape to a junior devil, Screwtape's nephew, Wormwood. If you have never read them they are well worth a look. They consist of advice from Screwtape on how to twist, seduce, and entice the man who has been allocated to Wormwood to tempt and lead to ruin. There is a passage in the 7th letter that struck me last week where Screwtape is discussing whether it is better to encourage the man, 'the patient' they call him, to become a pacifist or a patriot at the outbreak of the war. Screwtape is unconcerned about the war and these options of patriotism or pacifism because he sees equally good options for the tempting business in both.

"Whichever he adopts [Patriotism or Pacifism] your task will be the same. Let him begin by treating Patriotism or Pacifism as a part of his religion. Then let him, under the influence of partisan spirit, come to regard it as the most important part. Then quietly and gradually nurse him on to the stage at which the religion becomes merely part of the cause.... Once you have made the World an end and Faith a means, you have almost won your man and it makes very little difference what kind of worldly end he is pursuing. Provided that meetings, pamphlets, policies, movements, causes and crusades matter more to him than prayers and sacraments and charity, he is ours -- and the more 'religious' (on those terms he is) the more securely ours. I could show you a pretty cage-full down here. Your affectionate uncle, Screwtape"

C S Lewis is writing before the great popular movements of more recent times like Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights movement or Desmond Tutu and the Anti-Apartheid movement where the great good that popular crusades can do came really to the fore. But I think Lewis' point still stands. Screwtape doesn't care which religious or worldly faction we belong to as long as he can get us to care more about our worldly causes than the Christian life of prayer and sacrament and loving action.

This is a week when the Church throughout the world soberly and with due seriousness accuses itself of the brokenness and division that persist in the body of Christ: A body which is supposed to be, by Christ's command and prayer, "the one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church" we affirm our faith in week by week in the creed. St Paul's words in this mornings

Epistle demand that the Christians in the Church in Corinth, *“Have no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”*

But of course we know we are divided. From the Great Schism, to the Reformation and onwards to the ever increasing number of divisions within Protestantism, the Church divides and divides and divides again. That is why we pray for unity this week but given the extent of our continued division our prayer may seem little more than a barely credible formality.

And yet, this is not whole story. Here are four ways that the church, despite schism, is united:

Firstly, we know unity in our own communities of faith. I have been so struck by the affection and kindness and strength of the common life of this parish and of the bonds of affection that bind this community of faith together so strongly. And we are not alone in this. Christians across the world love one another and find unity in congregations like ours.

We all gather here week by week. We all seek to put our differences aside. We all bow our heads before the same throne of grace and we all kneel with hands outstretched to receive the same Lord into our frail hands and mouths and souls.

Secondly, we share a common faith and belief. Whatever we disagree about, the creed we say week by week contains a huge amount of core belief that is held universally by our 2.18 billion brothers and sisters in churches around the whole globe. All of them can, with hand on heart, say the creed we say each Sunday and believe it. There is an exception. The Filioque clause -- the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father “and the son” -- does still divide the Orthodox communions from the West, but apart from that we all believe it all. Those of you who will attend the Adult Inquirers’ Class today and throughout Epiphany will be reminded of this huge ground of common belief as the weeks progress.

Thirdly, we are united in prayer. All Christians pray for the sick, for those in need, for the world, and, of course, we all pray that God’s Kingdom might come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Through prayer we all pursue our desire to experience the presence of God and to open our minds and hearts and lives to him. The Contemplative Life Ministry group in our parish exists to help anyone who seeks to develop this aspect of openness to and unity with God in prayer and contemplation. The daily pattern of prayer that we keep in the Chapel in the morning, at noon, and in the evening also joins us with Christians across the world who keep this pattern also.

In this desire to know God and to spend time in his presence we are also one with Christians everywhere.

Lastly, we Christians are also united by service. Denominational, theological, and many worldly differences fall away as people seek to help those in need in their communities and elsewhere across the world. As just one example, the growing numbers that are volunteering in the Soup Kitchen here at Christ Church, currently some 150 people, along with those who help in the Shelter and with SOME (So Others Might Eat), and the many other mission partners we support, are testament that there is a desire to serve here in this church. And in this we join with people from all the churches of the world that are also drawn to similar acts of service to the people in whom they recognize the greatest need. Anglican, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or

Protestant, it makes no difference, all who follow Jesus are drawn to some form of service to others. In this also, we are one.

Affection, Belief, Prayer and Service are Christian experiences of unity that are not to be overlooked even as we admit the scandals of our divisions.

Does this have any bearing of how you feel about the country today? Well, I will leave you to answer that. Maybe, maybe not. As a very interested observer and guest in this land, I think I would want to say only this.

As a Christian, I have absolute faith in the indestructibility of the Church and in the ultimate success of its mission in the world despite the fact that the Body of Christ is riven with division and conflict.

On a worldly level, I am also a citizen of a country that the American people have twice come half way across the world to stand beside, in the worst of times and in the darkest of days, to defend the fundamental values of a free world. When Winston Churchill was awarded his honorary citizenship by President John Kennedy, his thanks for this, the highest honor and gift that any country can bestow on anyone, included the words, "We stood together, and because of that fact the free world now stands." As a guest from another country, I still see great cause for hope in such a wonderful, courageous people and in such an ambitious and boundlessly energetic country as this, despite all its divisions, even though I understand that many Americans cannot, at the moment, see this. I suppose the Cole family, like many thousands before us from the shores from which we have come, are staking our futures on that hope.

But, you know, even if this hope were to prove utterly mistaken and false, as Christians, our real hope rests not in the empires and kingdoms and republics of men. All these must wax and wane and come to nothing in the end. All of them. Only one Kingdom will always remain, and that is Christ's Kingdom. That is where we all will reside, with God's mercy allowing, not just for 4 years, or 40 years, or for a whole lifetime, but -- we pray -- for all eternity.

We just need to avoid the pit that Screwtape is describing in his letter: the mistake of reducing our faith to a means to some worldly end, regardless of what that end may be. Meetings, pamphlets, policies, movements, causes and crusades, on any side of any divide, must never mean more to us than prayers and sacraments and the loving service of Christ and our fellow human beings.