

Easter 7 Year B: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1, 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6, 17-26
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Be one as God is one.

In the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

When I was young my brothers and I attended the catholic primary school about a mile from our home. Each morning and afternoon we would walk to school and we had to walk past the local state school. As we would walk past the kids from the state school would lean over the fence and yell out “Catholics, Catholics make us sick, call the doctor quick, quick, quick”. We would put our heads down and hurry past.

I found this all very perplexing. My family, although not religious at all, was extremely tolerant of all types of people and beliefs. In my home life I had never come across such rampart intolerance. One could say that the children at the state school were simply being kids – who as we know can be cruel and inconsiderate. Yet I think the chanting they threw over the fence each day betrayed a disease, a wound, at the heart of our culture - the wound of Christian disunity.

George Carey, the last Archbishop of Canterbury, quoted this statement at an ecumenical service in the year 2000. *Disunity distorts truth, wastes resources, hinders witness, impoverishes worship and discredits the gospel.* I think there can be no doubt that this is true. How can non-Christians take us seriously when we are at each others throats, tearing down what another Christian group holds dear, lobbying the secular government to oppose what another Christian group is trying to achieve, and perhaps the very worse, killing each other in the name of God. At the very least it is a scandal. At the worst it is a blasphemy, a perversion, a sin. I am using old fashioned words but I think they are perhaps the only ones that have the moral weight to describe this reality.

Yet if we look at the history of Christianity over the last 2000 years it is a faith that has undergone many transformations. It has fractured and splintered almost from the very beginning. From the time the first disciples formed a reform group within Judaism, through to the rise of Gnosticism, the Donatists and Arians, the split between Roman Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodox churches, to the Cathars in the 1300’s, to the Protestant reformation of the 16th century.

Right up until our day when there are literally thousands of denominations all over the world and schisms and splits are still happening. Our own Anglican Communion is currently under threat of a major schism. Except

for its first half decade (circa 30 to 35 CE), Christianity has never been a single, unified religion: Diversity seems to be the rule not the exception.

It is how we understand that diversity, how we live with the differences amongst us, that makes the difference. I have heard it said that being a Christian is like playing football – we are all playing the same game and we are just on different teams. The problem with that analogy is it sets up conflict immediately – different teams implies battling it out against each other. A better analogy is to say that we are playing the same game and we are on the **same** team – we all have different jobs to do on the team. A football team needs front row forwards, wingers, back rowers, half-back, full-back and all the rest.

Now even though I spent years following my brothers as they played rugby at the local club I am no sport expert so I think I might leave it there so I don't embarrass myself! I hope you can see what I am getting at! But if we are on the same team we need a way to help us understand both our differences and our similarities and how they work for the glory of God. We need to know how we can function as a team, a team that can win. To do that I need to slip back into theological mode – something I am a little more comfortable with!

So let's look at the Gospel reading. It is interesting to note that John the Evangelist who wrote the gospel we have been reading from over the Easter season was living at a time when divisions and factions were causing problems for his fledgling Christian community. The priestly prayer of Jesus in chapter 17 seems to address these concerns. In this prayer Jesus pleads lovingly and longingly for followers who will create a new kind of servant community. The requests he makes in this prayer can easily be summarised by some of the well-known words of the Nicene Creed – one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

The first petition is for unity. Jesus was praying that they would focus on what unites them rather than what divides them. You see, when people are focused on who is central and what is important, they are prevented from falling off at the periphery, from dropping out of the community. This is so well known to us today. The story of factions and splits is the story of this dropping out of community. Of course each side of the debate accuses the other of breaking community but this again reveals that both sides are focusing on the wrong thing. Jesus prays over and over again that his followers will be one as he and the Father are one. It is what unites us that counts, not what divides us. It is important for us to hear, almost two thousand years later, this

plea, “Holy Father, keep them in your care, so that they will be united just as we are.” And it’s just as important that when we confess the Nicene Creed, we reflect on the meaning of one of those words, as we say, “I believe in **one**, holy, catholic and apostolic church.”

Next, Jesus calls them to be a holy community. We forget that Jesus never called us to power or authority or empirical rule. He certainly wasn’t calling us to a life where we have all the outward appearances of a holy life – church attendance, good works, a prayerful demeanor. He called us to holiness, to purity, resulting only from faithfulness to God. If we are in fact a “holy” people, we are set apart from the common culture. Our lifestyle should challenge, even at times reject, what many consider popular, acceptable, or true. As followers of Jesus we are called to centre our lives in God’s words of love and justice and peace. Only through such a focus are we truly set apart. Only with such a perspective do we understand the meaning of the second word in the Nicene Creed when we confess, “I believe in one, **holy**, catholic and apostolic church.

Next, Jesus passed on to his followers, the very truths that allow them to claim a common identity. When Christians travel to scores of countries and meet people of many religious persuasions they find that their allegiance to Jesus and his teachings mark a common identity. In the Philippines many of the services were in Ilocano or Tagalog. David and I would sit there and everything would go over our heads of course. We couldn’t understand a word of it.

Yet there were points in the service when our common identity was beyond words – at the passing of the peace, at the sharing of communion, in the welcome and love in peoples eyes. This universality belongs to all Christians. We can say that we believe together in “one, holy, **catholic** and apostolic church.” Jesus himself gave us the teachings by which we know that we are family and that this family supersedes all our national and political allegiances.

Finally, the earliest church also struggled against the problems with “navel gazing”. I have a friend who rails against people who spend all their time contemplating their spiritual pulse and never do anything for other people. Prayer and contemplation are absolutely critical –indeed I think we are spiritual cripples without them – yet it’s worth remembering again and again that Jesus has sent us, sent us to do something. The word apostolic comes from the Greek to “send out.” The word “apostle” meant the person was an emissary or ambassadors for Jesus. We might not be called apostles but we too are ambassadors for Christ - in everything

we do and say.

Perhaps in each of our lives, there are ways in which words like “one, holy, catholic and apostolic,” could take on more meaning. We can focus on what unites us, rather than what divides us. We can be a holy people by centering our lives in God’s words of love and justice and peace. We can remember that we have a common identity shared with Christians all over the world, catholicity beyond dogma and doctrine, and we can take up the call to be the “sent ones”, sent to be witnesses to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Friends, as we gather around the table to share in communion, may we be a united, welcoming community of loving human beings who reach out to others. May Christians in all places find their common identity and work together in the service of the Lord. May the Holy Spirit whose coming amongst us we celebrate next week enliven and unite us in love. Amen