

Christian Unity

Today is the start of this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This observance dates back to 1908 as the Octave of Christian Unity. This year's theme is "Only Justice". It is worth quoting the introduction by the General Secretary of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland to the resources prepared for this week:

"This year we are reminded again that our prayer for unity is offered up amidst injustice and that Christian disunity is in so many ways related to the divisions in our world. The Churches of Indonesia, from whom the material comes, speak out of a context of ethnic and religious diversity, and where there is a strong emphasis upon the need for a unity that is found in diversity, and one built on solidarity and collaboration. Yet they also highlight issues of economic injustice and how religious pluralism can face challenges in the face of radicalization. This gives us an opportunity to reflect upon the context in which we pray for Christian unity. How do divisions in our society contribute to divisions in the Church? How does injustice in our British and Irish contexts create challenges in pursuit of our shared life together?"

The goal of Christian unity is more than trying to unite the different denominations into a single organizational structure, which may or may not actually ever be feasible. It is surely much more about working together, about getting to know one another, about celebrating not simply what we believe and hold in common but also our differences. The aim of the Community of the Cross of Nails to live with and celebrate diversity applies as much to the Christian Church as to the world at large.

Visible unity is still a long way off but we have made progress in the last hundred years. Physical conflicts between Christian groups are thankfully a thing of the past. There is much more contact at both senior and local levels.

In some respects divisions within denominations are more difficult than those between them. The traditional divisions have to some extent given way to divisions based on authority: between a more prescriptive rigid understanding of faith and a more open one. As stated in the words I quoted at the beginning this is often a reflection of divisions in society more generally – divisions of which we are all too aware in our own country at the moment.

This year's focus on justice is thus important. For it reflects our strong Christian concern for the well-being of others, both at home and elsewhere in our world. For we believe God to be a God of justice. And that striving for justice, for mutual love and respect has to start in the Church, as St Paul so forcibly reminded us in our Bible reading just now (Ephesians 4.1-8).

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