

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	1 June 2025
Service:	Eucharist, Seventh Sunday of Easter
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

Last week I had a very kind invitation from our brothers and sisters down the road at St Richard's Roman Catholic church to speak to what turned out to be a large group. The focus was on the way in which, on this 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed, so many different aspects of the Cathedral illuminate different aspects of the faith that the Creed expresses. I think everyone had a reasonably enjoyable evening, but at such events there is always the painful awareness that we remain a divided community. In the case of our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, we say the same Creed and we share a common baptism which is recognised by all, but we are not yet in full communion.

If we wanted to know why that is a problem, one of the best places to look is today's gospel reading from St John's gospel in which Jesus prays to the Father on the night before he died. He prays first for himself, then for his disciples, and after that for those who would believe through the witness and testimony of those disciples, in other words, for you and me. And the request in that prayer is 'that they may all be one', that the Church may be united.

The reason why is this so important rests on two things.

The first is *theological*: to do with God. Jesus prays '(Father)... may they be one as we are one'. The unity of Jesus with God the Father, their divine love for one another is to be mirrored in the love and the unity that Jesus' followers have for and with one another. So Christians are called to reflect the life of the Trinity: to be one as Christ and the Father and the Holy Spirit are one. It is a very high calling – to mirror God's life in our own inter-personal relationships. And it is also very difficult for those of us who have been brought up in western society and see ourselves first and foremost as independent, self-governing individuals.

The second reason why unity is important is *missiological*: to do with mission. Jesus prays 'may they all be one... so that the world may believe that you have sent me'. It is the unity of believers that will persuade people that Jesus really is the Son of God. By

contrast, if we are *dis*united then we will not be able to convey that message. Let me try to illustrate that.

Some years ago I heard a talk by a priest from London, Richard Carter, who had formerly served in the Solomon Islands. As some of you will know, these very remote islands in the Pacific Ocean are the home of an extraordinary Anglican religious community called the Melanesian Brotherhood, in which large numbers of strapping young men enter monastic life for a period of years. It is in fact the largest Anglican religious community in the world, numbering around three hundred. In the late 1990s, terrible ethnic violence broke out throughout the islands. Seven of the brothers who had sought to make peace were taken hostage and subsequently murdered. I was very struck by Richard Carter's point that in a world that is divided and torn apart in the way that he had seen very brutally at first hand, we simply cannot give adequate witness to Christ if we ourselves are divided.

In the Mass two weeks ago to inaugurate his pontificate, Pope Leo XIV echoed this theme: that only a Church where Christ's followers are one can fully witness to God's love in the midst of desperate global divisions. He told the congregation

'I would like that our first great desire be for a united church, a sign of unity and communion, which becomes a leaven for a reconciled world... In this our time, we still see too much discord, too many wounds caused by hatred, violence, prejudice, the fear of difference, and an economic paradigm that exploits the Earth's resources and marginalises the poorest.'

So that sounds all good in theory but where does it actually leave us? In some ways we are in what seems like an ecumenical winter, very different to the period of optimism around the late 1960s and 1970s, when it really seemed possible that the different Christian denominations might all be able to get their act together. I remember that in the first parish where I served, we had a local group of churches which planned a programme of annual events such as joint services, talks and teas, and the annual highlight, which was jokingly referred to as the 'ecumenical barbecue'. It was good work, but pretty clear that this was a formula which had now run out of steam. More recently, whilst collaborating on joint ventures such as foodbanks and night shelters, the different churches tend to work in more siloed compartments and, because everything so easily defaults to a business model, see ourselves as competitors with one another for market share.

Let me finish then with two specific suggestions about how this unity may be found in our current circumstances.

The first was suggested by Leo's predecessor, Pope Francis. At various times Francis made the comment that if somebody is about to kill you for being a Christian, they probably won't ask which denomination you belong to. 'In various parts of the world', he said, 'the witness to Christ, even to the shedding of blood, has become a shared

experience of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, Protestants, Evangelicals and Pentecostals'. And this shedding of blood was, in his view 'deeper and stronger than the differences which still separate our churches'. It's quite a sobering thought but renewed persecution and martyrdoms in different parts of the world – things that we are seeing at the current time – may be precisely what brings Christian unity deeper and closer as division becomes a luxury we can no longer afford.

The other suggestion may sound like a bit of a cop out but it is a spiritual one. The days of activist ecumenical efforts to organise barbecues and such like may seem to be over but we *cannot* ignore Christ's prayer that we should all be one, and we *can* allow him to pray his prayer to the Father in and through us so that in some way we ourselves will become part of the momentum towards its fulfilment in the nearest possible time.

Jesus looked up to heaven and prayed: 'Holy Father, I ask not only on behalf of these (disciples), but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me'.