

Sunday 8 July, 2018

*A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe,
at Choral Evensong at St Paul's Cathedral London:*

Readings: Jeremiah 20 : 1-11a, Romans 14 : 1-7

I bring you greetings from the Primate of Australia and Archbishop of Melbourne, Dr Philip Freier, and from the people of St Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne. Although we are 10,500 miles apart, your Cathedral is remembered in ours. Not only in the shared dedication, but quite literally in stone: part of your reredos has been incorporated into one of our Chapels, and a beautiful carving from your choir stalls was presented to us on the occasion of our centenary.

Our shared story is brought to life today by visits like mine today, as well as by sharing in mission. Last year, we were delighted to join with you in creating greater awareness on Water Justice. This year, we are sharing with you in the Care of Creation Initiative, highlighting our joint commitment to safeguarding the world around us.

These kind of shared initiatives across the Anglican Communion are visible signs of our belonging together. In our second lesson from the epistle to the Romans our mutual patron saint, St Paul, reminds us that we can only ever grow in communion. Paul tells the Romans that as Christians 'we do not live to ourselves'. As Christians we always live in community: we never are alone but belong to one another and to Christ.

From that mutual belonging flow a number of obligations for the Christian community, Paul tells: the obligation to be generous in spirit and support one another through our means; the commitment to be welcoming to those who are different from ourselves; and the responsibility not to judge one another. Paul spells out these three obligations so clearly because unity and belonging is not our natural state of being: we have the tendency to define ourselves by allying ourselves with some, and separating ourselves from others. Belonging is hard-earned: we have to work together in order to maintain our Christ-willed unity, Paul knows.

+

Our second lesson concludes Paul's appeal to the Roman communities to forgo their divisions. Christian identity, Paul tells them, is defined by our shared allegiance to Christ. We pledge that allegiance at the moment we are baptised. Our belonging is life-long, and life-giving and extends beyond death, Paul explains: 'whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord' (Romans 14). And that belonging was bought at great cost, Paul reminds us: 'Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of the dead and the living'. That is why maintaining that unity is such costly business; and draws on all that we have, both our material and spiritual gifts.

The simplest way in which we make visible our unity, is when we share our resources to build or rebuild community. 650 miles north of Melbourne, deep in the Outback, lies the small town of Wilcannia. It has a tiny community of Anglicans, who worship once a month. Following the Blitz, that small community sent financial contributions to help restore this Cathedral. In 1945, we were able to demonstrate our belonging together by enabling this magnificent place of worship to rise again from the ashes of the Blitz, through sacrificial giving and sharing our scarce post-war resources with one another. 'Contribute to the needs of the saints', Paul put it earlier in Romans, and 'hold fast to what is good' (Romans 12.9, 13).

+

A second way in which we can express the unity of the body of Christ, Paul tells us, is by welcoming people into our community who are radically different from ourselves. In the case of the Roman Christians this included people who had very different views on fundamental principles: what to eat and when to keep the weekend. Instead of rejection and uniformity, Paul instructed them to exercise a ministry of acceptance and unity.

Welcoming people who are different from ourselves is a hallmark of Christian community. In the chapter after our second lesson, Paul insists: 'Welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God' (Romans 15.7). In welcoming one another, we live out the welcome we ourselves received in baptism: complete acceptance by Christ of who we are – regardless of our race or language, gender or sexual orientation, social background or length of discipleship.

The kind of welcome that proved to be a stumbling block in Paul's time, was that of gentile Christians: pagan, rather than Jewish believers. Yet the same 'unacceptable welcome' of the first century radically transformed the Christian community. In the chapter following our lesson, Paul explains that 'Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the gentiles, by word and deed'. And points to 'signs and wonders by the power of the Spirit of God' among the Christian churches of the Mediterranean as proof of that truth (Romans 15.19).

At our St Paul's Cathedral, for the past five years, we displayed a 30-foot banner on our South spire. 'Let's fully welcome refugees' it reads. When we first displayed our banner, we did so out of a sense of outrage that the Australian government had proceeded to establish offshore detention centres in third nations. The transformational effect on our Cathedral of our welcome to migrants and refugees, however, did not lie in our swaying public opinion. So far, we have not succeeded in persuading the Australian government to abandon its policies.

Instead we found that our congregations were transformed. Countless migrants and refugees visited St Paul's and asked us why we were welcoming them, when so many were not. Since we began our intentional welcome to migrants and refugees – through advocacy

and English classes; through teaching, worship and Bible studies in basic English; through shared meals and by providing a place of safety and friendship – our congregations have visibly changed. Today, our 18 congregations include people of all ages from more than 25 nations. We make visible our sense of belonging together, build community, when we go out to welcome people who are different from ourselves. ‘Extend hospitality to strangers’, Paul tells us, and ‘love another with mutual affection’ (Romans 12.9, 13).

+

The final way in which we may make visible the communion we enjoy in Christ, is by inviting people to walk with us; rather than exclude and condemn them. ‘Who are you to pass judgement?’, Paul challenges us in our second lesson. Who are we to judge fellow servants of Christ? Christ himself will judge our sisters and brothers, not we. Paul affirms: ‘it is before Christ, their own Lord, that they stand or fall’.

And in the light of that knowledge, we have to radically rethink our natural tendency of ruling fellow Christians ‘in’ or ‘out’. ‘Each of us will be accountable to God’, Paul tells in our second lesson, ‘therefore let us no longer pass judgement on one another’. Instead Paul encourages us: ‘let us resolve never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of another’. It is by walking together and learning from one another, that we can both grow, and enable one another to make better judgements.

Our Cathedral stands on the lands of the Kulin nation, the first peoples to settle what we now call Melbourne more than 60,000 years ago. When the first British settlements were established, the Kulin nation had their lands taken and were moved to reservations. There, they were deprived of their language, culture and spirituality. The two principal reservations in Victoria were run by the Anglican Church, and many indigenous people in our state identify as ‘Church of England’ today. The way in which for more than 150 years many Australians judged indigenous Christians to be of less worth than colonial Christians is deeply shameful. Rather than walk together, we chose to segregate and exclude, destroy culture and community, and ‘despised our brother and sister’. And yet faith remains central for most first Australians.

Over the past years, at our St Paul’s we have chosen to walk together with indigenous people. We spent a lot of time listening and learning to make better judgements. That listening often has been unsettling, and brought up issues of deliberate persecution, ongoing systemic discrimination and exclusion. This year, we brought together indigenous artists to work inside St Paul’s for a six-month arts program, *Yakama Yapaneypuk*, which means *Come Together* in the Yorta Yorta language of central Victoria. At the exhibition launch last month, one of the artists told me: ‘I brought together my Aboriginal identity and my Church of England identity in these paintings’. In the same way, I believe that we can all grow when we choose to walk together, not apart from one another. When, instead of judging and excluding one another, we allow ourselves to be enriched by our diverse

identities and our shared faith. 'Hate what is evil; let love be genuine', Paul put it, and 'live in harmony with one another' (Romans 12.9,15).

+

At every stage of our life as Christians: 'we are the Lord's', Paul encourages us in our second lesson. We never live to ourselves. We are given life and community through Christ, who gave his own life, 'so that you may belong to one another', Paul tells. As Anglicans, we can trace special bonds of belonging across the Anglican Communion, from Canterbury to Karachi, Abuja to Atlanta, Jerusalem to Rio de Janeiro, Melbourne to Marylebone, and Yukon to York. Our unity, our communion, is a precious gift from Christ. And maintaining it is costly, and will require all of our God-given gifts.

It is my prayer for you and for me, that we may be enabled to build and strengthen our communion in the way we support one another through our gifts and generosity of spirit; that we may refrain from condemning one another and instead listen and learn from one another to make better, Christ-like, judgements, and that we may extend our communion in the way we reach out to and include those who are different from ourselves. 'If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all', Paul exhorts us, 'overcome evil with good' (Romans 12, 18, 21).

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.