

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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“Bound to what?”

Readings:

Acts 16: 16-34;

Revelation 22: 12-22;

Psalm 97;

John 17: 20-26.

Ordering our Lives

A major characteristic of the evolution of human beings has been the communal nature of life. The capacity for the individual to thrive is born out of the ability to live and work in cooperation with other people. From this comes a means to defend the community from threats, produce food, care for one another, and provide shelter.

Strong communities grow out of a robust sense of common purpose which is seen in their capacities to provide for the needs of the whole group physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. To achieve this, however, an individual needs to give up an amount of their autonomy to a structure of power and authority that can order the society for the common good.

We have recently participated in such a process with the federal elections. In this instance electors have given authority to a group of people to form a government that can both make laws and regulate the life of the community. Of course, not everyone voted for the government and there are some who remain convinced that another group of elected representatives should be in charge.

Our society allows for this dissent, yet in many parts of the world there is effectively only one party for which you can vote, and dissent is crushed – such as in China and Russia. Fortunately, in Australia citizens can disagree with the Government and not be locked up, or persecuted, or deported. Here citizenship is indelible for those who belong.

So, what binds it all together? In response, we may consider things such as ‘the rule of law’ that provides for due process, or the ‘separation of powers’ as a brake against the insolence of office, or ‘equal opportunity’ so that all people might flourish, and of course ‘freedom of speech’ to allow for open participation in the life of the communitywell, that is the way it is meant to work. Whatever the situation, we remain bound together through a common life, a shared culture, and a national polity.

It is similar with the idea of religion. The word ‘religion’ comes from the Latin word *religare*, which means ‘to bind’ and carries with it the idea of obligation or commitment. It came into English as a description of those who lived in monastic communities, who were bound to each other through vows to God and the common life.

This facet of communal life continues in the use of the word ‘religion’ today to which has been added adherence to beliefs in a spiritual being or God, ritual practices, and an ordered life. Yet, in the case of Christianity, what commenced as a small Jewish sect has since grown into a cumbersome array of institutions that have a complex set of beliefs, practices, and structures - overlaid with a strong level of self-interest.

For the past 1,000 years Christian religious institutions appear to have been more often in conflict with each other rather than unified. This is not so much a binding experience as one that divides. We have witnessed it again in the recent General Synod and in the growing power base of the GAFCON faction.

That They May All be One

In contrast, the Gospel of John describes Jesus praying for the unity of his disciples before his betrayal and crucifixion. This is not a unity based on belief and practice, but rather one based on relationship. Jesus prayed:

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. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

(John 17: 21-23)

The witness of the disciples in John’s Gospel is one encountered through example rather than ideas or practices. John argues that the followers of Jesus are to reflect his nature to the world. In other words, the disciples are called to continue Jesus’ ministry to the world by fully participating in him, thereby being Christ to others.

Unity for the followers of Jesus is therefore to be discovered through participation in the life of Christ by love. On the other hand, unity is NOT to be found through conformity to statements of belief or adherence to particular religious practices. The mystery of unity is found in relationships, not in institutional hubris or control.

This is a unity that we seek to make present in the celebration of the Eucharist. We offer bread and wine and seek God’s blessing upon them, so that we can receive them back transformed by the presence of Christ and as a reminder that we participate in him and he in us.

This is a metaphor of the spiritual life by which we offer ourselves to God, seeking to be blessed and transformed, so that we can go out and be Christ to the world. Unity is therefore found through both our relationship with Christ as well as being Christ to the world.

In all our brokenness, inadequacy, fear, and failure God still receives us, blesses us, and works through us by grace. This is salvation; that God loves and accepts us as we are, and not because we measure up by doing good works in believing the right things or doing the right things.

It is in this way that we can also come to understand that conversion and salvation is a process and not an event. It is about the transformation of our lives that comes once we are released from being bound to things that draw us away from God and are instead bound to God through commitment to Christ.

Citizenship in Heaven

Back in the 1970s, the French Cardinal Avery Dulles authored several books and articles on the nature of the church that became standard texts for theological students – including me. He developed six models of the church, being:

- Institution – governing and administering the church
- Community – gathering, worshipping, and doing God’s work,
- Sacrament – manifesting the grace of God,
- Herald – proclaiming the presence of Christ,
- Servant – seeking peace, justice, and reconciliation, and
- School – nurturing followers of Jesus to become disciples.

This is principally a functional list of what the church does and how it engages with the wider community, and it gives us an insight into what the church can be.

In the past, I have also mused on the nature of church and its ministry, identifying characteristics such as being:

- A club for likeminded people,
- A community having open doors and hearts, and
- A communion centred on word and sacrament.

More recently, and perhaps because of the combination of a drawn-out election campaign, an aggressive General Synod, and a desire by some parts of the church to have control over others, I have noted a new model emerge of church as ‘political party’. Perhaps it has arisen because of the influence of the US ‘religious right’, or even because of our home-grown equivalent - the Australian Christian Lobby?

Indeed, in recent years I have read several commentaries arguing that the Anglican Church is like a political party in which members are expected to keep to the party line or else ‘leave us’. Focussed on the issue of same-sex marriage, it has recently been proposed that this expectation of party solidarity be extended from clergy to include employees of church institutions – especially schools.

It is a position that puts the needs of the institution above the needs of the people and certainly does not reflect the reality of the church as the body of Christ in all its diversity and brokenness. ‘Church as political party’ is an indicator of how realpolitik has infiltrated the church and handed power to loud voices and number-crunchers. It is un-biblical and a world away from the unity that is to be found in the mystical body of Christ. Moreover, it is unlikely to do the mission of the church any good.

For example, the Diocese of Sydney keeps its own figures on average church attendance each year. A notable change occurred in the 2018 figures that showed a drop in attendance of over 12% in one year. Furthermore, average attendance has not risen since then, suggesting it was a permanent drop. What happened to cause this?

2017 was the year of the debate and plebiscite on same-sex marriage, which included the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney making a \$1,000,000 donation to the NO campaign from the Diocese’s charitable trust funds. It was a highly controversial action both in the church and the wider society. It would seem that many people disconnected from the Anglican Church in Sydney over this issue, both because of the Diocesan stance and also the contentious donation. Currently, the average weekly attendance level of Anglicans in Sydney is under 0.8% of the population.

The political party model of church has consequences. It is a comfortable one for those who remain inside the organisation and who share in its prevailing ideology (the tyranny of the majority), but it alienates those who disagree and provides little opportunity for dissent. Can we look at this differently?

St Paul describes church unity using the metaphor of ‘citizenship’, which is something that cannot be taken away from an individual. Like the model of ‘family’, citizenship is more inclusive than exclusive and not manipulated by vested interests.

Jesus prayed for the unity of his disciples, NOT in terms of ideology or rules but rather through relationships. This is an inclusive unity based on God’s love, which we are called to demonstrate through our own lives. It is not an expression of power politics or partisanship but is directed to all people freely and without distinction. As we prayed in the collect:

*...grant that your Church, being bound together in love and obedience to you,
may be united in one body by the one Spirit,
that the world may believe in him whom you have sent,
your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.*