

THE UNITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

(Ephesians 4.1-6 and John 17.20-26)

Children's Activity

Pieces of jigsaw- we need to be together and we need each other.

Introduction

Our theme today is unity of the Holy Spirit;
In our first hymn we sang the words "one church, one faith, one Lord."
In our second hymn we sang "join our hands in unity."
Our children's activity showed the importance of all the pieces of the jigsaw fitting together to make a great picture and what happens if one piece is missing.

My first experience of Christians working well together in unity was as a student in Leeds in the 1970's.

Christian Union - Christian students of a variety of backgrounds united as believers in our Lord as Saviour and had specific aims:

- Witness to other students - Jesus as Lord and Saviour
- Deepen the spiritual life of members by bible study and prayer
- Emphasize the call to Christian service at home and overseas

Likewise Just 10 – Christians of many backgrounds united for the J. John outreach event in Preston Park.

Our Bible Passages Today

Emphasize the importance of and purpose of unity or being one – John 17.23-*"may they (that is the believers) be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."*

This was fulfilled in the early church: When the Christians were seen to be different by the love that they had for each other and their unity - Acts 2 after the Holy Spirit came in power we read that all the believers were together and held everything in common and that they gave to anyone as he had need - and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Jesus' prayer for us as believers can be described as an "ambitious prayer" – he prayed that "all of them (us) may be one, Father just as you are in me and I am in you."

It is God's will that we are as united as Christians as God the Father and Jesus are so that we might know God's fullest blessings as believers and the witness that is to the world.

As we think of unity, we can consider the unity within individual churches. Also, the unity of the wider church and how that affects both our individual witness as believers and our collective witness to the world.

In Ephesians St Paul emphasizes oneness -

- One body
- One Spirit
- One hope
- One Lord
- One faith
- One baptism
- One God and Father of all

This oneness or unity comes through believers trusting in our Lord and being led by the Holy Spirit to become "the body of Christ."

It is important that unity is not seen as meaning uniformity. There are different ways of doing things - illustration of Linda learning knitting - different ways of casting on and increasing.

In the church there are different ways of worship- e.g. western isles - no musical instruments, organs, worship groups etc - value of diversity.

The body has many parts (1 Corinthians 12.12) - there is strength because we are all different but united together by the Holy Spirit and working together for the one cause - the health of the body.

If we look at the world news today we can soon see that unity does not just happen. There is a vast amount of disagreement between countries – at best prolonged negotiations and resolution and at worst leads to wars. The United Nations and other organisations are kept very busy establishing and maintaining peace. Within nations there is often a range of disagreements between leaders on a whole host of issues. At an individual level conflict can arise between family members and work colleagues and there is lack of unity.

Likewise within the church differences can be fuelled into conflicts that can be very destructive and last for centuries or arguments can flare up in local churches and soon become very divisive - splinter groups can form. Much energy can be used up by lack of unity and by efforts to restore the peace - this can take us away from the purpose of the church and spoil our witness to the world.

So what can we do to ensure that we have the unity of the Spirit?

Pray

We are to pray for unity- just as Jesus has already prayed - we can pray too for ourselves for grace and forgiveness -and that barriers to unity are removed.

Ask for the Holy Spirit's leading and working in the situation and being open to the holy spirit's transforming power.

Pray for any churches - Christians known to us who lack unity

Think- use our minds

We can be vigilant to what is happening and threats to our unity. If we know there is a problem – we may have to think and pray through what the root causes of the problem are.

We may have things to do

St Paul wrote in Ephesians -4.2 “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient bearing with each other in love.”

Jesus said in the sermon on the mount- “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother and then come to offer your gift.” We may have to think and pray through what we need to do today to restore the peace- (the default within human nature is to expect others to see things as we see them.) Therefore we need the Holy Spirit working to bind us together in love.

This may involve saying sorry and asking for forgiveness. Jesus said “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (Mat 6:14-15). It may involve swallowing our pride and knowing what is a senseless controversy and when to stop an argument.

Sadly, there can be times when we have to agree to disagree - for example in the Acts of the Apostles Paul and Barnabas disagreed over whether John Mark should go with them and we read that they went their separate ways. However, later they were reconciled. It's very important to keep channels of communication open and not to allow relationships to be soured.

Living in unity and peaceful relationships go closely together - Ephesians 4.3 says “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. As Christians we may have opportunities as peace makers e.g. part of my management work as a doctor over the years has been to help restore the peace between colleagues.

Occasionally on a bigger scale Christians are called to bigger roles in peace restoration e.g. the work that archbishop Desmond Tutu did in South Africa with the work of the Peace and Reconciliation Commission did much to ensure unity in the country in the years after the end of apartheid - pray for them and for the Holy Spirit to be at work.

Conclusion

Unity is God's will for us and our churches.

It is a great blessing and really shows how God is working in lives.

Jesus has prayed for us and our unity.

The Holy Spirit is working in our lives and the churches for unity.

Psalm 133 says:

*How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!
It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down on the collar of his robe.
It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.
For there the Lord bestows his blessing,
even life for evermore.*

Closing prayer...