

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2024

We gather this afternoon from our different churches and traditions to pray that love may strengthen our unity. For people like me and, I feel sure, for many of you, that is a big ask when perhaps we have made up our minds now where we want to be, where we are happiest, and where we believe we have found our spiritual home.

Many of you will not know my personal ecumenical journey but in just a few words it goes like this. I was brought up as a child within the United Reformed Church in Woodford Green in Essex. The minister was a very lovely, smiley Welsh man whom my parents adored. His name was Bryn Rees and he wrote the words of the hymn we have just sung, 'Have faith in God, my heart.' Much later I went to University in Bristol as an URC but soon became drawn to ANG SOC (I think it was called) and was very much influenced by the Anglican chaplain who encouraged me to become confirmed. So I did! Although I had no idea at the time, I ended up in a Cambridge Theological College as an Ordinand, training in a Federation (as it is still called) with people from every denomination. I even eat my meals in Wesley College every day and survived to tell the tale! The food was awful but the fellowship was often divine because we had so much to learn from one another. And then what happened, you may ask? I eventually got married – to a Roman Catholic – and we have both survived that tale, too!

Each one of you will have your own personal stories and journeys to tell. If metaphorically, we wore T shirts explaining our various 'histories' today, it would be a very colourful sight indeed as well as being a true picture of our different faith journeys, all of which have been guided by God – often mysteriously - but also wonderfully, and richly.

In today's famous Gospel Story we know the biblical history and irony of the Samaritan being the one to do the right thing and most compassionate and loving thing. He was the one from a quite different tradition from the Jewish one and actually 'spurned for being different'. But that's the driving force and power of this parable. Despite our differences and conflicts, our misunderstandings or failings, each of us are called 'to go and do likewise', to be agents of concerted and united Christian action. We are not being asked to compete with one another for who is the most compassionate, any more than we should compete regarding who is the most prayerful or holy or kind. I 'm not offended if people say we're all 'bells and smells' at St Mary's any more than Quay Street will be offended if they are called 'happy, clappy'! But I do question whether these phrases are in any way helpful or, really, in any way meaningful. We actually have deeper stories to tell for both how and why we 'have faith in God, my heart.' We actually need to concentrate more on what we can do together well for the common good, as well as for the Woodbridge Area we both love and serve.

I get regular news from my last Parish – a mixed blessing if I am honest, because God always wants us to be in just one

place at any given time and not to keep looking back. But sometimes we find inspiration or get ideas, don't we, from what our friends are getting up to now, what they are exploring? Churches Together where I used to live have just announced an urgent request. They are compiling a recipe book for Lent to encourage a 40-day Lenten Fast, a tradition once shared among all Christians. They are asking for recipes (wait for it): "that do not use any animal products; recipes that use seasonal grains and vegetables of Great Britain in the time of early winter and early spring alongside local produce that may have been frozen or preserved from the seasons of summer and autumn." All proceeds will go to charity.

Now, I can already see Charles checking his Filofax and saying 'that's far too short notice, but perhaps we could do something similar two years hence'! Sorry Charles, I jest, but our Churches could seriously be helping to do something together for THIS Lent (in addition to our lunches). We surely must offer a concerted Samaritan role, to help the children of Gaza and Ukraine through such agencies as The Red Cross, or UNICEF, Christian Aid – you name it. We mustn't quibble about the agencies we use and pray for, but we must be proactive in offering our help, our calabash of water which together, with your help, could create springs of living water and living hope for so many families torn apart by war, famine and thirst. Today's Gospel is all about making that difference and bursting new wine skins, singing new songs of joy, and inviting the weakest, poorest, and most vulnerable: to discover God's 'Epiphany moments' of unconditional love

and compassion, and to make them sing once more, their own Easter songs of praise. In the name... AMEN.