

Easter 7 2025 All Souls' **UNITY AND LOVE** dtw

"That they may all be one...that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." John 17. 21, 26

The period between Ascension Day (last Thursday) and Pentecost, next Sunday, is observed in the southern hemisphere as *The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*

The girl in the Sunday School class was becoming increasingly uncomfortable as the teacher spoke about life, death and heaven, and that we'll all be together one day forever. The teacher then said, "Hands up if you want to go to heaven". Up went all the hands, except for Jane's. Upon observing this, the teacher asked Jane, "Don't you want to go to heaven?" "Yes", Jane replied, "but not with this lot!"

About 35 years ago, the United Methodist Church in America revised its hymnal and the Revision Committee considered dropping *Onward Christian Soldiers* from its repertoire, because of its militant tone, which was a genuine concern. You won't find it e.g. in *Together in Song*. The suggestion prompted the writing of 11,000 messages of protest, which won its final inclusion. It's a very well-known tune, written by Arthur Sullivan of Gilbert and Sullivan fame. The text was written by a CofE priest, Sabine Baring-Gould as a processional to be sung by children as they marched from one village to another for a religious festival. 'The cross of Jesus going on before' referred to the processional cross, while 'see his banners go' referred to the banners carried by the children. The hymn makes it clear that the battle is a spiritual struggle and it requires the unity of a marching force, rather than separate bodies marching to their own drummer. It goes, 'We are not divided, all one body we, one in hope and doctrine, one in charity'.

This of course is the ideal, it is what Christ prayed for, it is what Paul admonishes the first believers about, it is what the church universal should be about, it is what the Anglican Communion should strive for. "If you can't hear the voices beside you, you're singing too loudly", instructed a choir leader. This was wise counsel for harmony well beyond the musical sphere. Once we identify ourselves as Christians, we become part of that social organism Paul called the body of Christ; the Church. And we do so in the fellowship of Love. That doesn't mean we're all the same. Body parts are very different but they all need each other to function. The church in fact is a pretty mixed up and incompatible bunch of people that Christ is leading into the Kingdom. Christ's love and guidance somehow manage to do something unique and beautiful to us. I really feel that here at All Souls' because, despite occasional differences of opinion, there is such a desire for harmony, growth and joy within the body of Christ in this place, particularly joy. We recognise that we are on an important journey together, while we don't take it so seriously that we miss the plot. We recognise that the Vision is bigger than we are and that the real experience is in the *journey* rather than the destination.

Provided we are sensitive to each other's needs and feelings, listening to and supporting one another, nothing will stand in our way.

The same can be said of a marriage or any worthwhile relationship or group. I remember John Smith of God Squad fame once saying that too many people use the word 'incompatible' as an excuse to quit in marriage when the going gets tough. Rather, he suggested that a real marriage consists of two essentially incompatible people learning the skills to live with each other! A determination to love beyond our fleeting failures and differences is another secret, not only for marriage, but also for the Church and for the World. I often quote John Powell's recipe: 'Love is not a feeling; love is a decision'. He went on to write, 'Two people in love can continue to deepen in their affection for each other while holding opposite opinions in almost any area in life.' (*The Secret of Staying in Love*) Again, the same holds true for a Church. It is also something for which we should pray intensely for our international and national Anglican scene. It is because people and their needs and their issues of justice and liberation are different, that I personally believe that our Communion can and should bear both wide and embracing unity and love, alongside local grass roots justice-making, instead of the schism, which is growing exponentially, where one group insists on its own way as being the only way. However, a lowest-common-denominator unity, without inclusive justice, is not unity at all.

Christ's High Priestly Prayer of John 17, otherwise called his Prayer for the Church is completely based upon his relationship of unity with the Father, "that they may be one, as we are one, that the world may believe." Our church does not need uniformity, God forbid. But it does need unity, unity in faith and hope and love, in spite of many real differences. That is what the world is looking for in us too; that is what will make the world sit up and take notice. It was said of the early believers, "See how they love one another." I remember singing the song, 'They'll know we are Christians by our love' in a band at a Folk Mass in St Peter's Cathedral in the early 70's. Maybe some of you were there?! It seems most apt at this hour in the life of our church, locally and worldwide.

Let us pray:

God of boundless grace,
you call us to drink freely of the well of life
and to share the love of your holy being.
May the glory of your love,
made known in the victory of Jesus Christ, our Saviour,
transform our lives and the world he lived and died to save. Amen