

Sermon: “One, yet many”

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Wesley Uniting Church, Canberra, Easter 5, 6 May 2007

Bible readings: John 13:31-35, Acts 11:1-18

Back in January in Marrickville I took part in worship with the Tongan Sydney Parish. Over 800 people were present, about 150 of them we commissioned as office-bearers for the year, 8 choirs sang, my sermon took twice as long because it was sentence by sentence translated, and the service went for 3 hours. In February in St Alban's Melbourne, I visited our Victorian Filipino congregation, 250 of them, plus 8 ageing Anglo people, the remnant of the former Methodist congregation, who say the emergence of the Filipinos in the past few years has been their salvation. The congregation has plans for a new 3 million dollar church complex.

Our migrant congregations in the Uniting Church are alive and well. In the past 12 months I have preached in congregations of Koreans, Indonesians, Chinese, Niueans, Tongans, Tamils and Samoans. Each Sunday, worship is held in 41 different languages in the Uniting Church - 16 Aboriginal languages, English, and 24 other migrant languages. On average, around 12% of Uniting Church worshippers worship in a language other than English, 1 in 8 of us - and most of those congregations are growing. We are indeed a multicultural church.

But if it hadn't been for the events of Acts chapters 10, 11 and 15, probably none of us in Australia would be Christians at all. For Peter's dream of a sheet lowered from heaven containing so-called unclean animals was the beginning of a huge controversy in the early church. It took almost 50 years to sort out that to follow Christ meant a whole new faith, not just a new sect within the Jewish faith. The apostles, Paul and Barnabas, with some support from Peter following his experience in Caesarea, won the day. The decision that Christians do not have to observe Jewish laws and customs and culture but are free to express their faith in Christ in their own language, their own culture, their own style, meant that world missionary work took off, and a church of enormous and rich diversity is the result.

Of course that does not mean that every cultural practice from every tribe or nation is acceptable within the Christian faith. It does not mean that anything goes within the Christian church. For Jesus left teaching and example that transcends cultural norms.

More than anything else his teaching is about love. In today's gospel reading Jesus emphatically gives his disciples “a new commandment”, very simply “that you love one another”. He links this command to his own love for them “just as I have loved you, you also should love one another”. And then he adds what might be called the “credibility clause” - “by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”.

Whenever Christians fail to live with love for one another and with love for others generally, then the credibility of the faith and of the church is damaged. In our generation Christianity in the West has been badly damaged by a few priests and ministers found guilty of sexual misconduct, some even of pedophilia. Dreadful. In the Uniting Church we've fortunately not had instances as bad as that. But what we have had has been deep divisions of opinion on controversial issues such as

sexuality, especially homosexuality, and at times the debate has not shown much evidence of love for people of an opposing viewpoint. I firmly believe debate on controversial issues is a healthy and necessary element of wider church life, as Christians work together to perceive the truth of the matter, to seek God's will. But if the debate deteriorates to name-calling and personal denigration then it is unchristian debate. Sadly, the debate in the early church at times included aggressiveness and nastiness - you don't have to read too hard between the lines of the New Testament letters to see that. When Paul writes to the Philippians (3:2) he is very critical of the Judaisers, missionaries sent from Jerusalem by the Jewish Christian leaders to insist that Gentile converts must follow Jewish laws and customs. Paul's anger shows through, and he calls them "dogs". Some letter-writers in our own synod newspapers in recent years have similarly resorted to name-calling against those who in fact are their Christian brothers and sisters.

Sometimes we hear church members saying we need always to act with respect for people who have different viewpoints to our own. That's fine, it's true, but in Jesus' eyes it's not enough. What Jesus says is "love one another". We are to act not just with respect for others in a church of diverse people, but with love for each other.

This Thursday I'll be in Sydney for a formal dialogue meeting between the Uniting Church and the Greek Orthodox Church. The topic is sexuality and leadership. Our team includes people with different viewpoints on this issue. We are keen to show the Greek representatives that you can have differing opinions yet still be in the same church and, more importantly, still love another. It will be a fascinating day.

Now, let me hasten to add that I am in no way suggesting we people here at Wesley are guilty of division or nastiness amongst us. Quite the contrary - our sense of caring and fellowship and our welcome towards people from all sorts of backgrounds is great. We are indeed a multicultural church, where all are accepted, all loved by God.

The sacrament of Holy Communion binds us closely to Jesus. He instituted this sacramental meal, he first celebrated it with all twelve of his disciples, a diverse bunch, and it's possible others were there as well, perhaps the women disciples. We believe that in his risen presence he is here with us today.

But this sacrament binds us not only to our Lord, but also to each other. We are a diverse bunch, we come from many different backgrounds, we are a multicultural church, we have different opinions on lots of issues, but the Lord Jesus Christ binds us together as one family, God's family. Note again the Communion cloth which covers our table today - and its embroidered message of "One flock, one shepherd".

Our love for one another, or our lack of it, is a measure of the depth and strength of our faith. "By this everyone will know that we are Christ's disciples, if we have love for one another".

To the glory of God. Amen.