

UCA 37th Anniversary – 22June 2014 – Wesley 9am & 10.30am

Theme: “Oneness”

Text: “I pray also for those who will believe in me through the disciple’s message, that all of them may be one...” John 17: 20b-21a

Introduction

I love being part of the Uniting Church with the freedoms we have and the opportunities to dialogue with other traditions.

Many of you know the rough statistics. There are roughly 300,000 members of the Uniting Church, with approximately 1.1million Australians claiming some association with our denomination. We have around 2,500 congregations, 51 regional Presbyteries and 6 Synods (state based bodies) along with a National Assembly that meets once every three years.

The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress is the Aboriginal arm of the church with some 10-15,000 Aboriginal and Islander people involved.

We were brought into being on the 22nd June 1977 by an Act of Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, when after 20 years of discussion the majority of Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregationalists had voted in favour of union.

We are the third largest denomination in Australia and have more than 7% of our people worshipping in other languages along with our indigenous brothers and sisters in Christ.

Particularly the Korean and Pacific Islander sections of the church are areas of growth.

The church is diverse, with a range of views and practices in theological and spiritual emphases, worship style, social opinion and mission foci.

Having said that I love our denomination, there are times where our structure of ‘inter-related councils’ drives me to almost madness.

I say ‘Let’s make a decision and get on with it’ rather than forming yet another committee and the issue seemingly never gets resolved! Yet in amongst all that is our continuing strong social justice attitude that comes to the fore on many issues. This is an area of the church’s life that heartens me.

Story from this past week

Last Monday I represented the Canberra Central Parish at the giving of 36 financial scholarships for education to refugees and asylum seekers as part of World Refugee Week. We as a Parish support this programme which is run by the Canberra Refugee Support group. It was a pleasure to see the happiness of those receiving these encouragements in their new country of Australia. The recipients were from a variety of countries including Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Burma, Somalia, Ethiopia to mention but a few.

Thomas Albrecht, the United Nations Regional Representative for the UNHCR, spoke eloquently on the need to be good neighbours to those seeking a new beginning in a new country. He made three points:

- Firstly, the importance of generosity towards refugees/asylum seekers
- Secondly, the fact that refugees/asylum seekers need to be protected and their courage and perseverance to arrive in this country after all they have gone through needs to be recognised
- Thirdly, he encouraged us to celebrate refugees/asylum seekers and what they can and do bring to our country and the contribution they will make

What a great three point sermon that Mr Albrecht shared with those present – being good neighbours.

I thought of the Uniting Church and the breadth of countries represented in our denomination. I thought of the worshipping language groups that is something in the 40's on any given Sunday around Australia, under the banner of the Uniting Church. I was proud that the Canberra central Parish was part of supporting refugees and asylum seekers locally and that we were and are being 'good neighbours'. I also thought about us keeping pressure on our government and opposition, to be more humane in the care of those seeking asylum on our shores and the divide between those arriving by boat compared to coming through our airports.

Now to our Gospel reading for today from John 17:20-26

This is last section of Jesus' three-fold prayer, just before he is arrested and put on trial, prior to his execution on the cross. In John 17 he prays for himself, the disciples and 'those who will believe' because of the testimony of the disciples. In this sense it is a prayer for us today, those later day believers and followers of Jesus, the Christ.

In this futuristic prayer of Jesus, two wonderful characteristics of him shine forth like a beacon:

- Firstly we see Jesus' complete faith and radiant certainty in the future. Here Jesus is close to the end of his human life but there is a confidence that the Good News that he has ushered in will continue despite his death. He has full confidence in the disciples and the message of hope, love, care and salvation that they will preach and teach. As I mentioned earlier, there are times when you wonder about the future of the church. Currently, with the horrific sexual abuse cases before the Royal Commission, I wonder how the 'church' will go into the future. Sometimes within our own denomination I wonder about the future of the church with a significantly aging population and not a huge number of young people. What will happen? I do not know. However here in this prayer, which could be all doom and gloom as Jesus approaches his death, this isn't the focus. Rather it is the future and encouraging the future. Here at Wesley we need to take this on-board. Next Sunday afternoon we have Rod Dungan here sharing with us about Children's and Youth Ministry. Don't simply say 'I'm past that and leave it up to others.' Come, listen to Rod, be part of the discussions and above all be encouragers of those who are involved in this area of ministry. In one congregation where I was the minister, we had a number in their eighties that came to each youth service. Why? Well not necessarily because they loved the loud band but because they wanted to encourage the youth and enjoyed their vibrancy and saw them as the church. Jesus prayed for the church of the future and encouraged that. So should we.
- Secondly, Jesus prayed for 'oneness or unity'. Some have mis-understood this. They think one-ness or unity means that all must think, act and do everything in harmony. This is not the case. Rather one-ness or unity is a relational issue based on the love of Christ for us and our response to that love. We will have a variety of opinions, thoughts, and attitudes to a whole bunch of things including Scripture and worship as well as social issues. However the one-ness or unity is based not on creeds or whatever but on our relationship with God through Jesus who was sent to be with us. Ours is a relational religion and not a religion based totally on a host of laws or rules and regulations. Hence Jesus' prayer is personal, relational. How slow are we, like the early disciples, not to see the relational images of Jesus' ministry. Here at the end of his life, Jesus prays that we may live by those positive relationships. This was seen in the explanation of the Godhead last Sunday, Trinity Sunday, with the aspects of the various relationships of God the father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

No denomination, no church is perfect. We are a bunch of people with all our frailties on show. However, on this anniversary Sunday of our Uniting Church it is good to be reminded about some of our strengths and also to be reminded that Jesus prayed for us long before ever we were thought about, in human terms, and he still calls us to a relational, inclusive and loving faith based on the one-ness found within the Godhead.

Praise be to God for the word of hope given to us in Scripture today!

Let us Pray

Loving God,

We give you thanks for the freedom to be able to worship. We thank you for today and the anniversary of the Uniting Church. Encourage us in our faith. Encourage to share that faith and encourage us to pray for one another and the life of the church universal, particularly where there are struggles, persecution and fears in following Jesus. May we understand the one-ness/unity that Jesus was praying for and may we live out that unity.

Through Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen.