

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: Follow Me. Come and See.

Prayer

Come Holy Spirit. May I speak the Word of God, and, in the Word may we see a vision of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Introduction

Follow me. Come and see. Last week Jesus was baptised in the River Jordan by his cousin John the Baptist. This week he is forming a group of disciples. Firstly two disciples of John the Baptist, one of whom was Andrew, who shared with his brother Simon the news from his teacher John the Baptist that Jesus was the Messiah. Peter then promptly went with him, and Jesus gave Simon the name Peter. Jesus then called Phillip, who brought along Nathanael, who was much more doubtful that someone from Nazareth could possibly be the Messiah, but was convinced by Jesus' insight into his spiritual life. As well as those four, Mark's gospel also includes the calling of James and John.

We know the story and it's quite straightforward, so what might it have to teach us about Christian Unity, or indeed about prayer? Well, to find that out, I think we have to dig a little deeper into the story – which isn't too difficult because John's Gospel is full of deep meanings.

Names, People & Places

Firstly, let's look at what we know about some of these six people that seem to have been the first disciples of this new Jewish Rabbi who was said to be the Son of God.

Andrew and his brother Simon Peter were from the town of Bethsaida, which is on the East Bank of the River Jordan in Syria. Bethsaida means House of Fishing. They were fishermen. We know what happened to them. Peter led the disciples after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and was the rock on which the Church was built. Many years later, he became the first Bishop of Rome and Andrew became the first Bishop of Constantinople.

From Peter is descended the Western Church and from his brother Andrew the Eastern Church. The Church divided 1000 years after Jesus because bishops fell out over whether the Holy Spirit proceeded from Jesus, the Son of God, as well as from God the Father. The bishops of the West said yes, and those of the East, no. The Pope agreed to change the Nicene Creed, the Church divided and we are still divided 1000 years later. But Pope Francis, the current successor to Peter, and Patriarch Bartholomew, the current successor to Andrew, are determined to bring this separation to an end. They have jointly announced a celebration of the first ecumenical council of the Church to be held in 2025 in Nicaea, where the Nicene Creed was agreed. It is thought they are probably working towards an Ecumenical Council which will reunite the Western & Eastern Churches.

Phillip was also from Bethsaida so was probably also a fisherman like Andrew & Peter. His part in forming the group of disciples was to invite Nathanael to 'come and see' and it is thought Phillip became an evangelist.

Nathanael was from Cana in Galilee (John 21:2) - as in the wedding - which comes next in John's Gospel. To him, Jesus promised that he would see heaven open and angels

ascending and descending on the Son of Man. This was a description of Jacob's dream of a stairway stretching between heaven and earth, when God promised that all nations would be blessed because of Jacob and his children (Gen 28). When Jacob woke up he named the place Bethel, which means House of God. Nathanael means Given by God and to him was given an important spiritual picture of the unity between God the Father and God the Son.

Nathanael had been sitting under a fig tree, which is where Jewish spiritual teachers taught. So he was probably someone who reflected on the spiritual teaching he had heard, and would have recognised the significance of Jesus applying Jacob's dream to himself. As the Messiah of the Jews, and therefore a descendent of David, Jesus was a descendent of Jacob, and through him God's promise to Jacob would be fulfilled. The spiritual children of Jesus, starting with Peter and Andrew, James and John, Phillip and Nathanael, would be taking the good news of salvation to all nations to bless them.

Church and Disciples: Called as one

So in this story, we've now discovered the foundation of the Church, and a vision of what the purpose of the Church is, and that these fishermen were called to be fishers of men, women and children. We've also realised that the Church did not remain One in Christ.

In John's story the disciples get to experience the spirit of God at work, and then Jesus fills them with the Holy Spirit, so that they are commissioned to continue the purpose of God. As the Father sent Jesus, so Jesus sends them (John 20:21). The calling of disciples is the means by which the Word of God is to remain alive in the world, and be taken to all nations by those who are called.

What's the problem?

It's a great plan. Psalm 139 is a beautiful song of joy in the presence of God, "You have searched me and you know me. You created my inmost being. How precious to me are your thoughts. When I awake, I am still with you." (Psalm 139:1, 13, 17-18). Those who hear the call of Jesus, "Follow Me", "Come and See" and respond become disciples filled with the Holy Spirit to continue the mission of God. What could go wrong with that?

Suddenly the beauty is rudely interrupted by the psalmist's anger against those he sees as enemies of God. "If only you would slay the wicked O God! Away from me, you bloodthirsty men! They speak of you with evil intent. Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord. I have nothing but hatred for them." (Psalm 139: 19-22).

The psalm concludes with a prayer for wholeness (Psalm 139: 23-24), as though the psalmist might just be wondering whether the enemies of God are a figment of his own imagination. "Search me, O God, and know my heart. See if there is any offensive way in me".

The experience of the Eastern and Western Churches shows that once we separate it takes a long time to resolve. Over a thousand years in that case!

Many Muslim leaders condemned the recent terrorist attack in Paris. The Palestinian political party Hamas even said they "insist on the fact that differences of opinion and thought cannot justify murder". But how often do we commit murder? Well, the Apostle John said in his pastoral letter, "Anyone who hates their brother or sister is a murderer. And you know that no murderer has eternal life." (1 John 3: 15). What suffers when we chose

not to love is our own soul. What suffers when we chose not to love is our own relationship with God.

There have been many terrorist attacks recently. If we align ourselves with victims of injustice in the world, then we align ourselves with the God of justice. But if we align ourselves with the God of justice but not with each other, then our souls are not well. Jesus says "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen." (1 John 4: 20). So to be part of God's work of justice, we have to be part of God's love.

The way of God is love. The way of God is unity in diversity. As a church we love diversity. As church members we learn to choose to be united with someone who expresses a different view, and not reject them. It takes time, and some get there quicker than others. I wonder whether you have learnt the depth of love that is needed for us to be united in our diversity. I wonder whether I have learnt it.

Geoffrey Tristram and David Vryhof, both Anglican monks, commented last week:

"History is strewn with people who were living a comfortable, untroubled existence until they experienced the Epiphany of God in their lives. Like the first disciples, they left everything and followed Christ. They weren't punishing themselves, as some kind of penance; they changed their lives because they'd seen something better".

"What disciples must learn above all is to follow Jesus in his obedience to the will of God, though it mean suffering and death to their own preferred way".

This is the unity in diversity we are called to when Jesus says, "Follow Me" or when we receive an invite to "Come and See".

Prayer

Search me, O God, and know my heart:
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.
Amen.