

 *St Paul's Anglican Parish of Ipswich*
SUNDAY SERMON

Epiphany 3

Delivered by Rev'd Steve McMahon on the 26th January 2020

One of the lessons I teach all new curates and students is that whatever you do in a service, do it positively. Even if you make a mistake, do it with confidence and there is a good chance that no-one will notice. Indeed, sometimes, a mistake actually becomes part of the liturgy when it is discovered that it helps with the flow of the worship. Like it or not, ritual plays an important part of our time together in worship. The pattern by which we carry out our services is important since it not only provides familiarity with a potentially obscure set of actions, but it is also full of symbolism because it is the key to revealing hidden spiritual truths.

Ritual is not only to be found in our church services but can also be found in many other areas of life. How many of you “touch wood” to prevent an unfortunate happenstance from coming to pass simply because you have named it? Or clink glasses together as you each partake in a celebratory drink whilst wishing each other “cheers”, “iechyd da”, “prost” “lechaim” or “bottoms up”. These rituals are a means of bonding people together in a common belief.

Perhaps most surprisingly, a rich source of ritual can be found at sports grounds every week. Along with the actions that take place on the pitch - the toss of the coin, shaking hands, exchange of banners and so on - the crowd are also deeply involved in the ritual of the game. As a lad growing up in Middlesbrough I was lucky enough to live ¾ mile away from Ayresome Park where the Boro played. Every home game there we could hear the songs and chants from the terraces - even if we weren't on the terraces themselves. It's a long-standing tradition for football fans to sing chants, but chants can increase rivalry and therefore possibly hostility as well. Experience shows that chants and slogans can be manipulated to incite violence - and sadly, something with all the potential to unite people can be misused for destructive and harmful purposes.

In writing to the Christians at Corinth, Saint Paul doesn't hide the fact that there were splinter groups within the early Church. Each group had its own slogans. Differences and disagreements made them appear like opposing teams. Some shouted “I am for Paul”. Others were for Apollos or Cephas. Around the leaders of the early Church personality cults had grown up and those who chanted ‘I am for Christ’ were reduced to one voice among many.

Paul hated this disunity. He pleaded that Christians should be united in faith and belief. It was Christ crucified and no other into whom they had been baptized. And Paul's message was straight and direct - he put Christ at the centre; in the seat of glory - and stressed that he must be the basis for unity and not a source of division.

This clearness and simplicity of Christian discipleship and the unity that is demanded is made very clear in the Gospel where Jesus first calls fishermen by the Sea of Galilee. HE is the focus of their response and they leave everything to follow HIM. HE becomes the centre of their lives.

We know the history of the Church; divisions among Christians were not limited to Paul's day in Corinth. Divisions are still with us today but, mercifully, many Christians are working together in peace and harmony. The chants and slogans of opposition are giving way to the efforts of dialogue and co-operation. Sadly, there are still those who present an all too disunited a front, so much so that a friend of mine once suggested that rather

than having a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity there needs to first of all be a Week of Prayer for Anglican Unity!

This flippant aside actually reveals the divisions which we face as a church. We are all very familiar with the differences between the various denominations in the Christian church, but we also observe the factions within Anglicanism itself - divisions borne out of ideals which people hold very dearly but which cause bitterness and faction. The issues over women bishops, same-sex marriages, and so on all cause dissent and yet are based upon our individual interpretations of the gospel whereas Jesus said remarkably little about any of these subjects.

And, of course, there is now the bigger and wider vision of seeing how we can work together with believers of the other world religions and faiths; Muslims, Hindu's, Sikhs and so on. If we struggle to work with our fellow Anglicans; if we struggle to work with our fellow Christians, how can we expect to work with those of other faiths?

And yet we are called upon to work together: we have seen excellent examples of how we can work together no matter what our faith in the stories that have come out as a result of natural disasters such as the bush fires that have plagued this country lately. When we ignore our differences we can actually work well together.

We are called to build up our communities into places where Jesus, the person of love and forgiveness and compassion, is clearly at the centre and the focus and the proclamation of his kingdom. A Christ-centred community is one that works to put divisions aside, so we need to start there. If we honour Jesus in this way it might just be that we find that there is more that unites not only all Anglicans, but also all Christians and, indeed, all believers of all faiths than would tear us apart.