

SERMON

The Rev Dr Paul Goodliff, General Secretary Churches Together in England

Hello, my name is Paul Goodliff and welcome to my home here in Bicester, a fast growing market town in the North of Oxfordshire. I'm a member of the Baptist church here in Bicester, Orchard Baptist Church. And it, and all the other churches in town have good relationships with one another and work together well, including Saint Edburg's, the ancient parish church in the centre of town.

In this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, I'm glad to be able to have this opportunity to speak as I am general secretary of Churches Together in England for National Ecumenical Instrument. If we've learned anything from this lockdown, it is how to stay safe and patient at home. How to abide you might say. Jesus is walking from the upper room to Gethsemane and he and his disciples would have passed the temple as they did so and across the porch of the temple was the great golden vine.

Saying to all of the world that Israel was God's true vine and Jesus, as he passes it and speaks to his disciples, says, "I am now the true vine." And if you want to be part of God's purposes now you've got to stay connected to me. You've got to abide in me. And this theme of abiding in me is the one taken for this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This insistence on staying put, of not moving far is one of the great gifts that St. Benedict of Nursia gave to not only the Monastic church, but the whole of the Western church, writing in the mid-sixth century in a world in turmoil of his own. And in our footloose and mobile society, the emphasis upon trying something new, of going somewhere fresh, of moving on from the old and embracing the new, be that the next brand of mobile phone or upgrade or the next streamed box of television programmes.

But Jesus says that the true fulfilment, the source of true fulfilment, and nourishment of soul is remaining connected to him, of staying put in him. The branch of the vine will not get nourishment with an occasional visit to the stem in the hope that it might bear some vine, some grapes. It needs to stay connected permanently. And this metaphor for the life of the believer is poetic and evocative but what does it mean? What does it mean to abide in Christ so that He will abide in us? First it means that it has a personal dimension. Each one of us is connected to Christ individually and intimately and by prayer and attentiveness, we remain close to Jesus knowing him and loving him. That is surely the source of the nourishment of soul that produces good fruit, patience, kindness, courage, faithfulness, and above all, love.

Archbishop William Temple writing in 1940 in the middle of the Second World War says, "Abide in me, all forms of Christian worship, all forms of Christian discipleship have this as their object. Whatever leads to this is good.

Whatever hinders this is bad. Whatever does not bear on this is futile. This is the life of the Christian. Abide in me and I in you. All truth and depth of devotion, all effectiveness in service springs from this. It is not a thing for words but for the deeper apprehension of silence". But this passage chosen by the Monastic community of Grandchamp in Switzerland as the theme for this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has also an indelibly communal dimension.

The vine is composed of many branches, all part of the one vine. And Jesus follows the parable of this vine immediately with the command to his disciples that they love one another. And the first and most Christ-like of the fruit that comes from abiding in Christ is our love for one another. Over the past 500 years, we've moved from persecuting one another to walking together in a pilgrimage towards the unity that Christ calls us to. And the past 100 years could well be described as the 'ecumenical century', where we've come to recognise one another across all of the traditions as brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow believers, fellow branches of the one vine.

But have we begun to discover the depth of love in one another as Christ loved us? It's all very well to tolerate one another's styles of worship, particularly if it's only once a year, at the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity unity service. And it's fine to take opportunities to pray with one another throughout the year.

And it's effective to find ways of serving the most vulnerable in our communities with one another. It helps when we collaborate to run that food bank or that debt counselling centre. And it's fine to acknowledge that that neighbour two doors down the road, a fellow believer is a Pentecostal, a Catholic or a Baptist or someone from the Orthodox church and recognise that they too are Christians as we are. But do we love them? Ecumenical organisation can only take our collaboration so far. What takes us into the heart of Christ's prayer and Christ's words to his disciples on the way to the cross, this word of abiding in me, is to discover how we might truly and deeply love one another. The evangelist John in his first letter says, "Beloved since God loved us so much, ought we also to love one another. By this we know we abide in him and he in us because he has given us of his spirit." Here is the sign that we abide in Christ. The sign is that we love one another. With a love that is empowered by God's spirit and lays down our preferences and ambitions for the sake of the well-being of others, so that they might flourish.

Such love motivates Jesus' journey to Gethsemane and beyond and the strength to persevere all the way to the cross and the tomb. And for him and for us, fervent prayer and the support of others is what gives the strength to cope with the challenges. And here is the goal of the ecumenical journey that the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity gives expression to every year.

Even as we learn to abide in our homes and stay put and find that to be the safest place we can be at the moment, so with patient endurance, we learn how it is to love one another and to grow in that love until the fruit of Christ is seen in the whole of the church. And all of the rich traditions of the church they give it its multicoloured and rich variety come together and as the one church seek to abide in the one Christ who is the true vine. May God grant us this year many opportunities to learn how to love one another, and to love our neighbour and to be that voice in our communities, which gives expression to the love that God has for all of creation.

Amen.