

CHRISTIAN UNITY WEEK 2018

On our deanery trip to Germany last September we were each given the photograph which is on today's bulletin – two sculpted hands entwined over a wall.

The wall is actually a cemetery wall near Lake Constance where we stayed. It's not the boundary wall of the cemetery but a dividing wall in the middle of the graveyard. On one side of the wall Protestants are buried. On the other side Roman Catholics. We weren't told how deep the foundations go to keep the dead apart both above and below ground!

The two graves on either side of the wall are of a husband and wife who married in 1842. He was Protestant and she was Catholic. He died first, and knowing that she would not be given permission to be buried with him when her turn came, she had chosen the plot closest to her husband's on the other side of the wall and left instructions that for the two clasped hands to be sculpted to show, that in spite of religious differences, they would be as united in death as they had been in life.

What a symbolic picture as we come to the end of yet another Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

There's no denying that in the past religious differences kept people apart – even in death. Still today, near where we go on holiday in Ireland, there is a similar wall in the graveyard of the local church separating Protestant burials from Catholic ones.

And still, in Northern Ireland, religious differences are alive and well for a certain proportion of the population, though this is exacerbated by religious differences coinciding with political ones.

But are differences all that bad? It depends on how you react to them.

As In Germany all those years ago and as in N.I. still, religious differences can divide – that's the negative side.

But differences can be positive – and healthy.

What I mean is that there will always be diversity. Christians who follow Jesus will always have different ways of expressing their discipleship. There will be churches who opt only for adult baptism and others who celebrate baptising infants.

There will be some who stress the importance of the sacraments and others who think preaching is more important (though they usually have longer sermons!)

There will be some who are hierarchical with bishops, priests and deacons while others say that authority lies with each local congregation.

Some will give the Pope the last word, while others give absolute authority only to the literal words of the Bible.

What Christian Unity is about is respecting each other's differences.

We don't necessarily have to agree with them, but we can differ in good faith and still walk together, and pray together, and serve together for the sake of Jesus.

The disciples were a diverse bunch of people who had their differences but what held them together was their common love for Jesus.

As has been remarked, boundaries of definition can quickly become borders and ultimately barriers, building walls between the followers of Christ.

And that has happened not only between denominations but also within denominations.

Within the Anglican Communion today there are deeply held differences over gender and sexuality in particular, which have led to splits and breakaway churches. There are those who won't receive the laying on of hands from women bishops or from bishops with "tainted" hands which have ordained women priests, those who label as heretics and apostates those who work for an inclusive church.

Can we not say, in truth and with conviction, let's respect our mutual differences and not fall out over how we express our discipleship.

What example does it give to a broken and divided world when those whose core doctrine is love and forgiveness cannot respect each other and deal positively, rather than negatively with their differences?

Jesus prayed for his followers that they might be one, and says "I, when I am lifted up on the cross, will draw all people unto me."

From a height the walls which seem so high and insurmountable on ground level don't seem that tall.

Our epistle this morning gives us an imagined picture of heaven, where the focus is on worshipping of God rather than exalting our differences. And it was so good to see such a variety of churches represented and meeting for joint prayers this week. No one was trying to say they were better or truer than anybody else. The focus was on God.

In today's Gospel we see Jesus helping a young couple in their hour of need, saving them from the disgrace of not providing enough wine for their wedding celebrations.

He doesn't demand any pre-conditions, or ask them about their beliefs. Yes Jesus is encouraged by his mother but that is a whole different sermon!

He meets and ministers to this couple as they are. He meets them on their level and is not interested in labels. It has been well said that "Jesus respects the dignity of difference", and so should we.

After all, reconciliation and respect produce more good fruit than the destructive forces of domination and division.

Some hundreds of years ago, in 1492 to be precise, two important families in Ireland – the Butlers and the Fitzgeralds – were involved in a bitter feud over which of them should become the Lord Deputy – the King's representative in Ireland. And those differences led to violent fights, one of which happened near St. Patrick's Cathedral. The Butlers, fearing the worst, fled into the Cathedral and locked themselves into the chapter room.

The Fitzgeralds followed them into the cathedral, and realising that they were in a place of prayer where love and forgiveness were preached, asked the Butlers to come out and make peace with them before the altar.

The Butlers refused, fearing it was a trick. The Fitzgeralds cut a hole in the door of the chapter house and as a gesture of good faith, Gerald Fitzgerald, the contender for the post of Lord Deputy, thrust his right arm, his sword arm, through the hole in a gesture of peace. He knew the Butlers inside could have cut off his arm, but he hoped that by doing such a risky thing, they would know that he was serious about reconciliation. And peace was made.

That door with the hole in it can still be seen in St. Patrick's Cathedral today. It's called the "Door of Reconciliation" and the episode is the origin of the phrase "to chance your arm."

Hands reaching out, hands being clasped together, whether in a German cemetery in the late 1800's or through a hole in a cathedral door in Ireland in the late 1400's are powerful symbols for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Unity is not uniformity but rather is unity in diversity. May all who follow Jesus respect difference and not let it divide us in a negative way, but, in a positive way, reconcile and unite us.