

January 2021 (held via Zoom)

Theme: Greater unity amongst Christians and increased understanding between different faiths

30 minutes of prayer. Periods of silence throughout, for your own private prayer. You might like to light a candle.

We meet in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Jesus said: "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

As we acknowledge God's presence with us now, let's take a few moments of quiet, to still our hearts and minds; to put aside all those things that have occupied us so far today, and to look to God instead.

We begin with some verses from John, chapter 15. (v 1,4b,12,14-17)

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

A prayer from the service put together for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Lord, you invite us to abide in you who are the vinedresser who cares for us with love. You call on us to see the beauty of each branch united to the vine, the beauty of each person. And yet, too often the differences in others make us afraid. We withdraw into ourselves. Our trust in you and one another is lost. Come and direct our hearts toward you once again, that as one family we may praise your name.

Gracious God, you have called us to be a new community in Christ and yet we remain divided. We pray for effective ecumenical work at a local and national level, to build stronger relationships and promote understanding. Help us to learn and grow together, celebrating both our diversity and our common ground. We pray also for those engaged in dialogue with other Christian Churches around the world, and we ask that you will deepen the resolve to encourage and promote the unity of your church.

Verses from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (1; 10-13a)

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided?

The issues that separate and divide the Christian churches and denominations are many and various. In general we recognise the same set of writings as Holy Scriptures, and yet biblical interpretation can vary hugely. And so we pray

Lord God, we thank you for the gift of the Holy Scriptures, for the courage of those who wrote them, and the perseverance of those who handed them from one generation to the next. We pray for discernment for those who seek to interpret the scriptures for each new community and worshipping congregation, asking that they will remain faithful to your essential truth, delivering a message of love that is life-enhancing, liberating and transformative. Guard us against the desire to seek only the passages that seem to re-inforce our own ideas, and instead make us willing to be challenged into seeing the world and those around us from a new perspective. We pray that the scriptures will never be used to promote or justify hatred and violence, setting neighbour against neighbour, or community against community. Let your word be a source of inspiration, a force for good, guiding the way we respond to the needs of the world, at local, national and international levels.

Verses from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (12; 4-7, 12, 13)

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Lord God, look in mercy on your church and us your people. Forgive us our divisions, our suspicions, our constant desire to be right and to prove others wrong. Forgive us when we do not attempt to see another's point of view, or when we build barriers around ourselves to keep out those whose views are too different, too difficult or too demanding. Remind us continually that you call us into fellowship with one another, united in purpose: to love one another as you love us.

Much of society is now multi-cultural and multi-faith. This can be invigorating, presenting new perspectives. It can also be challenging, highlighting divisions and thus creating tensions. And so we pray

Gracious God, help us to live peaceably with those from other cultures and those of other religions. Teach us to respect the beliefs and practices of others and never to discriminate in the name of religion. We pray for a sensitivity that will encourage inter-faith dialogue, promoting greater understanding and creating opportunities to work together for the benefit of local communities. As we come together in a spirit of co-operation, help us to discover our common humanity. We pray also that a better understanding of different beliefs and values will enrich our own Christian heritage and deepen our own spirituality.

We'll take a few more moments in the stillness of God's presence.

Let's close by saying the grace together

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,