

St. Mary's Sermons

Luke 4:14-30 Week of Prayer

New Living Translation (NLT)

One of the questions that I am frequently asked, especially by those **not** connected with the church is, why are there so many different Christian denominations today? Not only that, but there is also a real sense of confusion around about groups like the Mormons and the Jehovah's witnesses, who claim to be Christians when, in reality, they are not recognised as true churches, primarily because they do not hold to orthodox doctrine specifically relating to the Trinity.

For those on the outside of the church this can cause a genuine obstacle to them as they explore what it means to be a true Christian. Why are there all the different sorts of churches, when you are all supposed to believe the same thing? Make no mistake about it, our divisions undoubtedly result in some people writing the church off as being irrelevant and not having a significant contribution to make to our society.

It seems to me that our reading this morning gives us some interesting insights into what has happened, on numerous occasions throughout the course of history, resulting in the proliferation of churches that we now have today.

Jesus never intended to start a new religion, but came to fulfil the promises that God made to his people in the Old Testament. However, when he burst onto the scene with his new insights into God's plan for the salvation of the world, he disturbed the status quo, upsetting the religious leaders. They took offence to the local lad who, in their eyes, was unqualified to be a religious leader and, at his apparent disdain for the traditional teaching of Judaism.

And despite all the amazing things that Jesus did, which authenticated his teaching, they quickly jumped to the conclusion that Jesus could not possibly have come from God. In order to protect the truth as they perceived it, they rejected him and even tried to stone him for blasphemy. If Jesus faced rejection when he challenged long-held man-made religious traditions, we should not be surprised when we see exactly the same sort of things occurring again throughout the course of church history.

Jumping forward 1600 years from the time of Jesus, we see something similar occurring to the reformers. Their intention was, not to form a new break away church, but to encourage the Catholic church to stop some of the nonbiblical traditions, like penance and praying to Mary which had become common practice at that time. The reformers perceived that the church had slipped back into a salvation based on good works, rather than by the grace of God alone through faith in the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross. When the reformers were rejected, it led to the formation of the protestant churches, including the church of England.

Now, I know that I have painted an over simplistic picture and, that it was much more complicated than that. For example, we are all aware of the part that Henry the 8th played in the formation of the church of England when he fell out with the pope who would not allow him to divorce his wife in order that he could marry again.

Sadly, splits within the church are nothing new, but go right back to the early church. Paul had to write to the Corinthians because of the divisions within the church which were beginning to arise about the merits of different leaders.

Of course, none of these divisions are biblical. However, Jesus clearly foresaw what would happen. One of his primary concerns immediately prior to his arrest was to pray for all those who would become his followers. In John 17 Jesus prayed that we might all be one.

By and large, today all Christian churches hold the core truths of the gospel, and the saving death and resurrection of Jesus as the only way of salvation in common, but they differ on matters of, how the church is organised and things like the style of worship and baptism policy. All these, while important issues, can be considered to be secondary matters about which we should be prepared to be tolerant and show mercy with each other.

I find it very frustrating that sometimes we appear to have got our priorities all wrong. We can get all hot under the collar about how different churches operate and yet fail to challenge those who deny key biblical truths of the gospel, like for example the virgin birth.

I have always believed that it is important that local churches should work together wherever possible and I am a keen supporter of the work of the Churches Together groups. I'm so pleased that all the churches here in Eastwood do just that and I consider it a real privilege to be co-ordinator of the local Churches Together group.

It has been a real disappointment to me that this year due, to the pandemic, we have not been able to hold our normal daily lunch time meetings during the week of prayer for Christian unity. The more we get to know each other, the more we discover that we have so much in common and, that we have much we can learn from each other.

When we see the failings of our own church it is easy to look, with rose coloured spectacles, at other churches and come to the conclusion that they are better than ours. The truth is, that the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. In reality, there is no perfect church. As I have often said, if I found the perfect church then I would not join it, as I know that I would spoil it. The truth is, as my great friend J. John has said for many years, none of us have got it together, but together we have got it!

I'm sure Steve won't mind me sharing this. You may not be aware that he spent his early years as a Christian within the Pentecostal church. In conversation with him recently I said how surprised I was that someone who had grown up with the freedom of worship in the Pentecostal church had, in later life, chosen to become an ordained minister in the church of England. In reply he talked about all the different weakness and traditions which had developed with the Pentecostal movement and talked about how he had come to appreciate the structure of the liturgy within the church of England.

In Ephesians chapter 4:3-6 Paul writes:

³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵one

Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.