

Sermon – Evensong – Epiphany 2 – 18th January 2015

Tis the season to be...united. As we gather here to worship in this season of Epiphany we continue to remember the visit of the Magi to Jesus showing us that Jesus is a revelation of God to all nations. And this Sunday also marks the beginning of the Week for Christian Unity where we recognise what unites us as Christians (in case anyone was wondering the default Sunday School answer of 'Jesus' is the right one) and pray for the day when the denominational boundaries that currently separate us will no longer be relevant.

And our readings this evening both have something to teach us about the Christian vision of unity. From Isaiah we have a vision of all nations bringing their offerings to God and all nations being united in a common purpose. And from the Letter to the Hebrews we hear that Jesus is a revelation of God's love for us and God's intention that in the fullness of time we are all to be with him in heaven. Through Jesus we are revealed to be children of God and *'heirs to the promise'*.

There is one God and God's promises must therefore be universal: *'God shows no partiality'* his promises are intended for all people. And if we have faith that ultimately all people are to be united in heaven that ultimate reality echos back to us here and now. We are united as Christians, we are united as human beings, both because we were all created by the one God and because we are all ultimately intended to be united with God. We are all children of the one God who is the source of all unity.

This week we have seen spectacular displays of a form of unity on our television screens. Last Sunday 3 million people attended 'unity' demonstrations across France following the tragic murders there. Here in Newcastle a few dozen people held a demonstration in solidarity with them below Grey's Monument. Demonstrators across cities and across countries were united by displaying signs declaring 'Je suis Charlie' – 'I am Charlie' – thus showing solidarity with the journalists of the magazine Charlie Hebdo and maintaining that the right to free speech must not be limited by fear of violence.

I think these demonstrations show a deep desire among their participants for unity and peace. But I'm not sure that they are example of the Christian vision of unity. There is still a strong undercurrent of us and them in these demonstrations and their associated politics. Our Prime Minister attended the demonstration in Paris last Sunday tweeting that *'I've accepted President Hollande's invitation to join the Unity Rally in Paris this Sunday – celebrating the values behind Charlie Hebdo'* and later *'I'm on my way to Paris to march with the French people. The Charlie Hebdo murders will not crush our spirit or our values.'*

But this worldly vision of unity, where our values are in competition with their values, each trying to force their will and ways upon the other can never result in true unity. The unity that God wills is never achieved by compelling others through force to be like us. In the Christian vision of unity there is no compulsion or force or threat of violence. The murder of journalists cannot take place within this vision. But neither can a dominant group subjugate, ridicule and demean a minority group leaving them feeling excluded and powerless.

I cannot ascribe to the sentiment *'Je suis Charlie.'* Unlike the Prime Minister have no desire to *'celebrate the values behind Charlie Hebdo'*. I celebrate the value of free speech not the values of Charlie Hebdo; they are not the same thing. From what I have seen of Charlie Hebdo's output it merely tried to mock everything in the most offensive way they could conceive. This does nothing to help build our common life together but feeds the cynicism that is so corrosive in our society. Their attempts to offend and mock religion are not limited to depictions of the Prophet Mohammed. They have previously also produced a front page cartoon depicting the persons of the Holy Trinity engaged in group sex with one another. I'm not hugely offended by this image in and of itself but by the intention behind it. They wanted to offend me and as such I feel offended.

Do not take from this sermon that the curate thinks the murders in Paris were in any way justified. The journalists of Charlie Hebdo had the right to be offensive without fear of violence. But they shouldn't have used that right in the way they did because what they were doing was sowing seeds of disrespect and distrust and disunity in their society. A right to do something doesn't mean that you should do it. The desire not to offend for the sake of offending is good. A common life together is built on trust and respect not mockery and force.

So particularly this week let us pray for true unity. Let us pray for our Muslim brothers and sisters as voices within our society demand that they apologise for what has happened, with the none too subtle indication that they are not welcome here. Let us pray for those who are angry and think they want vengeance. Let us pray for those who feel vulnerable and because of this seek power to suppress those they see as a threat, perpetuating violence and division. Let us pray for ourselves that we may try and bridge divisions, oppose injustice and work for unity.

And as we pray let us hold onto the hope of unity offered by God. Unity and justice and peace can seem distant at the moment. But God promises that ultimately there will be unity. God has promised it, it will be so. So after a fortnight of horror and terror let us mourn for those killed and for what has happened. Let us resolve to continue to work for peace and unity. Let us engage joyfully with the world because the unity of the Kingdom of God is coming.

Amen.