Sunday 23rd January 2022

*All material © Heather Whyte unless stated otherwise*

God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.
God is ever present, around us and within us,
we worship together in God.

Today is the Sunday in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, a moment to reflect and celebrate all that connects us as churches in God and to recognise and celebrate our diversity where it adds a richness to the tapestry of church, but also to pledge to find more common ground and work towards a visible unity in the life of God's church on earth.

**Suggested hymn** Thy hand O God has guided
Listen here

**Prayer**
Eternal God, our earthly lives are but are blink in the life of creation and yet you love us and hold us through all the ups and downs. You are aware of every thought and every feeling, every choice wrestled with, and every action deliberated, and your mercy knows no end. As we come together in your presence to offer our praise and adoration, and together to listen for the guidance of your Spirit, we bring to you the experience of the last week. As we pause to reflect on all that has happened and all we have experienced you are with us.
*Pause for a moment to remember the past week and listen in the silence.*
Eternal God, we thank you for all that we learn from life, for the inspiration and the encouragement of those around us, for the care and love of family and friends, for new friendships and new opportunities to explore our being in creation, all of which help us to grow and move forward in our journey of life.
In this week of prayer for our unity, as churches we pray for the fellowships we share with in the Heartland group, the churches we share with in the Synod and the wider URC, and we pray for the churches of other denominations within our towns. May we be a visible expression of your love wherever we are, and work towards a tangible expression of unity whilst treasuring the diversity of our lives as church.
This prayer we offer in the name of Jesus who called us to recognise our oneness with you and with each other. Amen.

**Readings** 1 Corinthians 12:12-31
Luke 4:14-21

**Video** Douglas thinks about different skills
Watch here

**Suggested hymn** We are one in the Spirit
Listen here

**Reflection**
I invite you to take a moment to reflect on your gifts and skills. Make a list of the things you enjoy doing, your hobbies and interests as well as noting down the skills you acquired during your working life. How many of these skills did others comment on as something at which you were good? A gift is generally accepted as something at which we are naturally proficient, what are your gifts?

Douglas reminded us that we are all special and whilst the skills and gifts we have may be different they are all important in the functioning of the church, and indeed of the world. When we read Paul's letters to the churches, we are aware that they are generally in response to some issue within the church. It is not hard to imagine what the issue may have been that prompted the section of Paul's letter which we heard today. There was probably a little bit of arrogance and hierarchy

happening – my gift is more important than others, there was probably some schisms happening and alongside all that would have been some disabling as people judged their own gifts as less important. The community was fracturing around God-given skills and gifts. Paul is at pains to help them see that they are all important, all special, and that the diversity is itself a gift to the community but more than that it is a necessity. Uniformity not only leads to a boring world it usually means a non-functioning world. Some years ago, there was an advert which asked us to imagine a world in which everyone had an orange bicycle? Paul asks his readers to imagine a body in which all cells are ears or eyes, or some parts are missing. Douglas reminds us that there are many people for whom this latter is a reality and who must adapt their lives to compensate because every part is important.

In the human body every cell begins with the same core make-up but as the cell develops it changes to become a cell for a specific purpose. Some of us are born with gifts, the things at which we are naturally proficient, although we usually need to develop that gifting through practice. Other skills we acquire for a specific purpose, parenting skills, the skills needed for our careers, and these are often a result of specific training, but our choice of career is also often linked to something deep within which we recognise as an interest.

Do we celebrate our skills and gifts enough? As Christians, as well as being a body we are part of the body that we call church, the people of God who have chosen to follow the way of Jesus. The good functioning of the church relies on people taking on responsibility and using their key gifts and skills for the benefit of others. Sometimes we don't think we have any gifts and skills and so we avoid the responsibility. In the story The Wizard of Oz, Dorothy meets a scarecrow who believes he does not have a brain, a tinman who believes he does not have a heart and a lion who believes he lacks courage. Through the story we discover that their belief is a result of judgements made about their actions or their attributes, and we later learn these judgements have been misplaced.

Watch a clip from the film here

An important gift is enabling others to see their gifts and to help them use their gifts. This can be a role for the church within a community, to enable others to identify their gifts and share them for the good of the community. We are called to love God with all our heart, all our mind, all our soul and all our body. We are also called to love others as one with ourselves, to value others for the gifts they bring, the skills they offer, and to help them offer those gifts and skills to others. In our reading from Luke Jesus reads from the scripture we know as Isaiah quoting, ‘‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, [19]to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." Jesus says he has come to fulfil that scripture and later calls on his followers to join him in fulfilling that scripture, to bring the kingdom closer. The mission of the church is a loving action which enables others to be freed from whatever ensnares then, to see more clearly the path towards a better world and help bring about an end to oppression in whatever form it takes.

I often worry that we expend too much energy on maintaining our Sunday worship style and not enough energy on our key mission of loving others. Covid has challenged the status quo and offered an opportunity to embrace a new way. Our Sunday worship is first and foremost a gathering in God's presence, a thanksgiving for our life in God, a time to share and listen for the inspiration of the Spirit the ideas that come form our conversations together, and a n opportunity to recommit to our life following the way of Jesus. I think this reading aften frightens us as church, it seems too big a challenge, how can we change the world? The answer is with small steps, by changing the way we do things and letting the result ripple out to others; by offering a loving example to the world. There are many people who are held captive through the lack of skills – we could share the skills we have through a sewing club, a repair café, a computer skills club. More importantly we could help others in our community to share their skills through clubs such as these. We do not need to have all the

skills ourselves, we can be a catalyst of sharing which enables people to gain skills that will be a step towards releasing them from a poverty of belief in themselves, or even a step towards reducing actual poverty through acquiring skills they can use to earn money. There are thousands in our communities held captive in isolation and loneliness, we could provide a release by offering a drop-in, a safe place to come and share the company of others, to share conversation and build relationships, we may even discover skills and gifts that could be used for other aspects of our mission and give new purpose to someone's life. We can help people to see a future, a way ahead, we can help people to see a different way of being. There are lots of organisations who can provide wisdom and knowledge, systems already in place that we can tap into, hosting a Re-engage tea party for example, or working with a medical practice. Perhaps your hobbies and interests could offer a way of reaching out. Think of how Gail from Wigmore has used her love of crochet to build the Covid memorial at Wigmore, perhaps there is space now to begin a 'crochet and chat' group to enable the sharing of this skill within the community. We all have skills and knowledge that could be shared. It is about loving others and fulfilling our call to change the world in small but important ways. Why not start a conversation with someone about how your skills or gifts could be offered in love for the benefit of others?

**Suggested hymn** Moved by the gospel, let us move
listen here

**Prayers**
*During these prayers you may like to sing the Iona response* – listen to tune here

*Pause for a moment to visualise the night sky as a blank canvas of dark blue, with one bright star, each time you sing or say the response imagine more stars appearing in the sky.*
A star led the shepherds and the wise men to where the baby lay. Today this star lights our path and reminds us that we too are stars for the world, guiding others to a new way, the Jesus way of love.
Today we pray for a visible unity in the work of the church around the world.
As we journey towards the one light may our lives be a light to others.
**Through our lives and by our prayers your Kingdom come**
We pray today for all Christian communities and the special gifts each brings to the life of the world. Recognising the diversity and treasure within the different traditions we pray that these may become a part of the rich tapestry that is the body of Christ whilst leading us to ever new discoveries of the wonder of you, our God.
As we journey towards the one light may our lives be a light to others.
**Through our lives and by our prayers your Kingdom come**
We remember with compassion the parts of the world where Christians fear for their safety and the survival of the Church is threatened by violence and oppression. Recognising the many different paths to you and the oneness of humanity we pray for tolerance and love between all people and a growing together that will bring your peace into the world.
As we journey towards the one light may our lives be a light to others.
**Through our lives and by our prayers your Kingdom come**
We remember the flight of the Holy family as refugees of violence, and we pray for all your children who live in situations of violence and who long for release. May our love for you inspire us to work for the release of captives whether they are captives of oppression, violence, or mental illness, and may we defend and embrace all who are marginalised by circumstances beyond their control.
As we journey towards the one light may our lives be a light to others.
**Through our lives and by our prayers your Kingdom come**
As the Holy family found new life in Egypt may we welcome refugees to a new life in our communities. May we use our gifts and skills to build a place of safety and love for the stranger in our midst, and through conversations may we begin to build relationships that will grow and bring new insight and belonging into our lives and the lives of those we welcome.
As we journey towards the one light may our lives be a light to others.

**Through our lives and by our prayers your Kingdom come**
After their visit, the wisemen found a different way home. We pray for our churches in this time of change, may we be open to new ways and new ideas, prepared to walk a different path in our journey to the kingdom. May we find the courage to let go of the past and embrace today in all its diversity and wonder, using our gifts and skills to build communities of love.
As we journey towards the one light may our lives be a light to others.
**Through our lives and by our prayers your Kingdom come**
As a sign of our oneness with other Christians we share the prayer of the disciples saying
Our Father…

**Our offering to God.**
As we worship together, we pledge our commitment to sharing in the work of our church through our continued offering and by exploring new ways of living generously and sharing the message of hope that is God's love. Amen

**Suggested hymn** (Tune Servant Song – listen here)

We are people on a journey,
through the world of love and fear,
drawing strength from knowing Jesus
and his message 'God is near'.

God unites us on our journey,
leading us on paths unknown,
showing wonders unimagined,
by our side, not on a throne.

One with us and with all people,
God embodies, Christ is light;
by his openness and sharing
giving wisdom and new sight.

So we gather to encourage
one another on the way.
Through our living and our loving
showing Jesus every day.

Children on the way of Jesus,
pilgrims guided by a star,
called to love and share our treasures
with all people, near and far.

© Heather Whyte 2016

**Blessing**
May the blessing that is the knowledge of God, source of all being, the love of God discovered through Jesus and the inspiration of the Spirit which binds us together be with us on our journey this day and every day. Amen.