

THE LOVE OF CHRIST COMPELS US!

Ecumenical Pentecost Service

Tuesday 10th May at
St Alban's Anglican Church, Epping

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The 31st October is an important day in the life of many Protestant Churches. Do you know why? It's not because it's Halloween and it's not just because it's the eve of All Saints Day. Indeed, 31st October was one of the biggest days in the life of reformed church where I served in Indonesia some 25 years ago.

Friends, the 31st October is Reformation Day and on this day in 2016 Pope Francis will travel to Sweden to participate in a joint ecumenical commemoration marking the Reformation that began 500 years ago. Here Pope Francis will visit the southern Swedish city of Lund where he will jointly lead a "common worship service" with leaders of the Lutheran World Federation.

It was on 31st October 1517 that Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of the castle church of Wittenberg. These theses were rejected by Pope Leo X and Luther was excommunicated from the church. The second major break in the church after the Great Schism of 1054 that separated the church in the East and the West subsequently took place.

The announcement concerning Pope Francis' visit to Sweden in October followed his visit to a Lutheran church in Rome where he, to the surprise of many, said to a Lutheran woman asking about receiving communion with her Catholic husband "*explanations and interpretations*" of communion may differ between Catholics and Lutherans, but "*life is bigger than explanations and interpretations.....talk to the Lord and then go forward.*"

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Last night the NSW Ecumenical Council, of which I am the current President, launched the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity at Leigh Memorial Uniting Church in Parramatta. Prepared by members of different churches in Latvia and jointly published by the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity and the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches, the liturgy focused on the call to “proclaim the mighty acts of the Lord”.

Next year’s Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is being prepared by churches in Germany. This is significant given the year 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Indeed, the theme for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity next year is inspired by Pope Francis’ 2013 Apostolic Exhortation “*Evangelii Gaudium*” (“The Joy of the Gospel”) where he quotes 2 Corinthians 5:14; “*The love of Christ compels us.....*”

“*The love of Christ compels us.....*” Here the biblical text does something quite important. It places Christ at the center. And with this before us it’s important to note that the truth we bear witness to has nothing to do with us or to what we think, it has nothing to do with what we consider or to what we prefer or feel comfortable with.

The truth we bear witness to is not dependent on what denomination we belong to, it is not dependent on whether we sing Wesleyan hymns or dive into Hillsong. It is not dependent on the ecclesiastical dress we wear or whether we follow structured liturgies or free-flowing worship forms.

For you see, the truth we bear witness to concerns Christ and his love. The Good News we share is all about our Lord Jesus Christ and what he calls us to be. And this is borne out in the ministry of the great St Paul who says: “.....*Christ died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.*”

Friends, this love that we speak of, this love of Christ - “compels” us. The Greek verb here implies “pressure” that “confines, “restricts” or “holds together” in the sense that Paul says Christ’s love “holds him to the task - no matter what”. Therefore, this is a love that “urges” (as the New Revised Standard Version says) or, perhaps, more poignantly “compels” (as stated in the New International Version) us to go on.

And this is a love that causes us to look beyond the things we think are important (and often go on create division and separation) to focus, rather, on the things that ultimately matter – the things that matter to God.

As the German Churches make their proclamation on the eve of the Reformation commemoration and as they look back on 500 years of division we are “urged”, we are ‘pressed”, indeed we are “to hold fast” to the most important thing of all - the love of Christ that “compels” us to move on.

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As we approach Pentecost it's important that the work of the Spirit leads us into unity. It is vital that the witness of the Spirit causes us to cross barriers and transcend the things that divide us. It is vital that the power of the Spirit carries us forward to a time when the perspectives, the understandings, the experiences and the contributions that each of our differing denominations offer do not lead to separation and division but, rather, become matters to be, in the love of Christ - celebrated and valued!

For it seems to me that the kind of unity that the love of Christ "compels" us to is not an organic unity in the sense that Christ is calling one singular, monolithic church into being. Rather, the Spirit of Christ, whose coming we celebrate this Sunday, causes us to acknowledge diversity, to celebrate difference and to value the particular witness and service of all the churches in our community – whether they be Orthodox, Catholic, Reformed, Evangelical or Pentecostal.

Here I question the popular notion that Pentecost is a reversal of Babel. For, with the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, the Good News is received in many languages. Acts 2 states: *"Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and were bewildered, because each heard them speaking in the native language of each."*

Friends, the Spirit celebrates diversity and it values the contributions of us all. It is in this context that we called to be the church!

Here biblical understandings of "church" include a variety of images including the "body" where we become a new humanity bound together in a community of many parts. Other images include "people of God", "city of God", "Kingdom of God", "sheepfold" and the "vine".

I believe each image allows for, indeed, each image encourages a richness of diversity. For the "body" has many parts, the "people of God" come from all over the world, the "city of God" is a totally open, inclusive community, the "Kingdom of God" is a radically merciful,

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compassionate society, the “sheepfold” is a shelter for all sheep and the “vine” has many, many branches.

And in all this diversity, in this community of inclusion, in this society of mercy and compassion, in this shelter of care and concern, indeed in this garden of many beautiful differences, our unity is held together, not through our own efforts and not through our own devices.

Rather, our unity is made possible through Christ who is our “head”. Our “one-ness” of being is there because of the God who draws us together in community. It is there because we are members of the city that is gifted to us by God. It is possible because we are members of the kingdom where God reigns. It is offered because of the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. And it is real because, as the braches, we abide in the Christ who feeds and nurtures us as the “vine”.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, on the eve of this Pentecost season, let us acknowledge our diversity. Let us value our differences and let us celebrate the giftedness and the contribution of each denomination represented here tonight. And in doing so, let us confess the One who brings us together. Let us profess the One who leads us on.

For the “love of Christ compels us”!

Christ who is our “head”, the “Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep and the “true vine” who nurtures and feeds the branches - calls us on. The God who draws us together in community, the God who gifts us with us a new society and with a new humanity, the God who reigns in the domain of justice, mercy and compassion – beseeches us, indeed pleads with each one of us - to be one in our witness, to be united in our commitment and to be joined together with one purpose in our service as the Body of Christ, as God’s people and as God’s community in the world.

Amen.

