

**St Andrew's, 21 January, 2018**

**Jonah 3.1-5,10; 1 Corinthians 7.29-31; Mark 1.14-20**

The material for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2018 has been produced in the Caribbean. I begin by quoting from it:

“There are 1.4 million Christians living in the Caribbean region, across a vast geographical spread of island and mainland territories. They represent a rich and diverse tapestry of ethnic, linguistic and religious traditions, with a complex variety of governmental and constitutional arrangements.

The contemporary context is deeply marked by the history of colonialism which stripped people of their identity, dignity and freedom. Christian missionary activity, closely tied to the colonial system, seemed to support, encourage and excuse it. During these five-hundred years, scripture was used to justify the enslavement of the indigenous people. In a dynamic reversal, those same scriptures became the inspiration and motivation for people to reclaim their liberty.

Like the Israelites, the people of the Caribbean have a song of victory and freedom to sing. Yet, contemporary challenges continue to enslave and threaten the dignity of the people. Many of the contemporary challenges are the legacy of the colonial past. The Caribbean economies have traditionally been based upon the production of materials for the European market – sometimes producing only a single commodity.

They have never been self-sustaining and their development has required borrowing on the international market. The servicing of the debt has caused a reduction in spending upon the development that it was meant to facilitate.

Abuses of human rights are found across the region and we are challenged to consider our manner of welcoming the stranger into our midst. Human trafficking and modern-day slavery continue to be huge issues. Addiction to drugs and pornography, are serious challenges to all societies. The debt crisis has a negative impact upon nations and upon individuals – their economies have both become precarious. Family life continues to be challenged by the economic restrictions which lead to migration, domestic abuse and violence.

The Caribbean Churches work together to heal the wounds in the body of Christ. Reconciliation demands repentance, reparation and the healing of memories. The whole Church is called to be both a sign and an active agent of this reconciliation.”

Our Service today has picked up the theme of being loved, following Christ and loving others. Our Bible readings speak of change:

In the passage from Jonah, we hear that God changed his mind and saved the Ninevites from the destruction God had planned;

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians we hear of the urgency of accepting the message of salvation – for the present form of this world is passing away;

In the Gospel reading from the beginning of Mark, we hear Jesus urging repentance – a change of heart, a change of mind, turning away from that which is familiar towards a new way of life: turning away from fishing nets to follow Jesus.

When we stop for a moment and consider our own lives, the habits we have come to rely on, the values we live by, the people we trust... very few of us would describe ourselves as revolutionaries... we tend to keep our eyes on the furrow we're ploughing and don't suddenly start the next row diagonally across the field. Those who do behave erratically are considered trouble-makers or deemed to be unfit in one way or another – depending on their age or state of mind...

Change can be exceptionally difficult to handle – not least when it is accompanied by illness, misunderstanding, social isolation, loss of one kind or another. Confronting significant change can be painful... But it can also be creative and life-giving.

I find it hard to imagine what it must have been like at the time when slavery was being challenged. Slavery suited the western world, it allowed the merchants and their/our economy to get richer, to build their empires – it even allowed them to have enough money to do good works. Slavery was accepted as a norm, upheld within the Bible and justified by a patriarchal society which diminished the value of black African and Caribbean people, with dire consequences.

Changing the mindset of those with power and authority took several decades and a great deal of courage and hard work. It is hard for us to look back and imagine how difficult it would have been to convince good Christian men and women that the people they saw as very different from themselves were actually just the same – their brothers and sisters, in fact.

In this week of prayer for Christian Unity I find myself wondering what contemporary issues enslave us and our fellow human beings.

What issues diminish our own potential or that of those around us? I am still troubled by the events within the Anglican Diocese of Sheffield which took place at the beginning of last year over the nomination of a bishop with traditionalist views, which made me speak up about the equality of women'

I found it hard to make a scene, even though it was something I was passionate about, understood well and believed to be an injustice. I knew that rocking the boat would cause pain to others and potentially exclude a minority whose view was very different from my own.

Does unity invariably mean compromise, finding the lowest common denominator, or can unity allow us to find a better way of relating to one another, even when we profoundly disagree?

I am not sure that I can answer that yet.

It is something which I am struggling with again now because of our different attitudes, within the church, towards human sexuality.

Throughout the history of the human race, people have had different experiences of gender and sexuality.

We think we are being progressive but some of the ancient native American tribes have much richer understandings of gender than the binary male/female, I believe that one tribe understood there to be five genders.

In our own times, we know that there are some people who feel that the descriptions of male or female simply don't work for them and that can create a terrible social isolation. Other people feel that they were born in the wrong body – a man in a female body or a woman in a male body. These days we are more open to conversations about gender and transgender, within schools and GP practices but people still suffer appalling misunderstanding and rejection.

In society at large we seem to be more understanding of different sexual orientations - that many people are not attracted to the opposite sex but to someone with whom they can identify more closely.

It's complicated and it's changing and so it's unsettling.

I believe that we, in the church, have got to find a way of engaging with these issues, theologically, sensitively and pastorally. It would seem that the church has a way of attracting those of us who are more resistant to change but there are times when we have to come out of our comfort zones and face up to realities which we would rather ignore.

The people of the Caribbean are encouraging us to face up to modern day slavery and they include among that, addiction and domestic violence. I would like to add sexuality. One way in which we enslave our fellow human beings is by telling them that they have to identify with a particular gender or sexual orientation because that's what the bible tells us is right.

It is dangerous when we use the bible as a weapon to maintain the status quo, as it suits us. Our readings this morning, from the Hebrew scriptures, from one

of Paul's letters and from the gospel of Mark, paint a very different picture. They talk of radical change, of allowing God to reach out to those we might not immediately think would be invited to God's banquet.

Do we think that God needs protecting from people who break the rules? It would seem that Jesus was pretty good at breaking all kinds of rules about who was in and who was out...

As people of faith we must constantly be alert to what God is doing, not what we think God ought to be doing. It is a risk to follow the God who is present on earth, the God who challenges us in those who are most unlike us, those with whom we most profoundly disagree...

Here at St Andrew's you face another period of change and the challenges that presents to you. I hope and pray that you will also find it is a time of new opportunities.

As fishermen are called to leave their nets and follow an itinerant preacher perhaps all of us are being called to think again about the things we take for granted, our health, our success, our identity, our faith, our church, and listen again to the God who calls us to step out in faith...

I was recently reminded of a quote from an Aboriginal woman called Lilla Watson, with which I end:

“If you have come to help me,  
you are wasting your time.  
But if you have come because your liberation  
is bound up with mine,  
then let us work together.”