

Christian Unity Prayer 2020
Thursday, 23rd January 2020 – St. Paul's Church @ 8.00pm
Homily by Most Reverend Julian Leow Beng Kim, D.D.

Points for Homily/Reflection

1. **'They showed Us Unusual Kindness'** ... the story begins in Acts 27 with Paul being taken by boat to Rome as a prisoner. Despite his chains, the mission of God continues through him. The 276 passengers are at the mercy of the elements of nature, and they begin to feel hopeless. Paul stands as a beacon of peace in the storm. Following his example, the travelers share bread together, united in a new trust revealed by God.
2. All lives were saved when the ship was wrecked off the Island of Malta, and the passengers swam to shore, even if their possessions were lost. The natives showed them unusual kindness, and they pulled together on the island to find a way forward.
3. Paul and the others involved in the shipwreck experienced the warm and concrete human kindness of people who had yet to receive the light of the Gospel. The reception they received was not rushed and impersonal but one that was genuinely helpful to the newcomers, without any cultural, religious or social prejudices.
4. In today's world many migrants are facing similar dangerous circumstances on the sea. On the land, different kinds of storms also rage. Since there are things all around us that could be feared, kindness and hospitality are much needed fruits of Christian witness today. The contemporary Christians of Malta, in choosing this theme, remind us it was through unusual kindness that a divided people were drawn closer together, and the Gospel was furthered.
5. The early Christian world is full of such acts of welcome. Hospitality was considered a central practice of the Christian life. It's no surprise, given that Christians themselves were outsiders in the Roman Empire that deemed Christianity dangerous at worst and misguided at best. As part of an illegal and widely-considered subversive sub-culture, Christians practiced hospitality to the stranger.
6. Further, as Christianity spreads across the multi-cultural Roman Empire, it takes root in diverse cultural and ethnic contexts, creating a multi-cultural religion. Christians must learn to deal with "the other" across lines of language, culture and ethnicity. Paul's experience in Acts provides a pattern that will repeat across the early Christian centuries.
7. Even after Christians are no longer outsiders but part of the official religion of the Empire, we find sermons devoted to welcoming the stranger as Christ. In preaching on Matthew 25 in which Jesus claims, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

8. Hospitality is a much needed virtue in our search for Christian unity. It calls us to a greater generosity to those in need. The people who showed unusual kindness to Paul and his companions did not yet know Christ, and yet it is through their unusual kindness that a divided people were drawn closer together. Our own Christian unity will be discovered not only through showing hospitality to one another, but also through loving encounters with those who do not share our language, culture or faith.
9. The theme stresses the unusual kindness given to St Paul, something that must be seen in the quest for Christian unity. Through unusual kindness towards one another, Christians are drawn closer together, heeding the prayer of Jesus, 'that they all may be one'. There must also be an awareness of the need for hospitality to the migrants and refugees who today embark on journeys as dangerous as that of St Paul.
10. And this is a law of the Gospel: when a believer experiences salvation, he does not hold it back for himself, but puts it in circulation. "The good always tends to communicate. Every experience of truth and beauty seeks for itself its expansion, and every person who experiences a profound liberation acquires greater sensitivity before the needs of others". A "proven" Christian can certainly become closer to those who suffer because they know what suffering is and make his heart open and sensitive to solidarity with others.
11. Paul teaches us to live trials by clinging to Christ, to mature the "conviction that God can act under any circumstances, even in the midst of apparent failures" and the "certainty that those who offer and give themselves to God for love will surely be fruitful". Love is always fruitful, love to God is always fruitful, and if you allow yourself to be taken by the Lord and you receive the Lord's gifts, it will allow you to give them to others. It always goes beyond love to God.
12. When Jesus was asked, "And who is my neighbour?" he told the parable of the Good Samaritan, instructing his audience to show mercy and "Go and do likewise." Upon reading and reflecting upon the life of Jesus, there's little doubt to how he would treat immigrants.
13. The basic themes of the gospel: love, joy, peace, kindness, forgiveness, and hope can hardly be questioned. For people claiming the faith of Christ, showing love and compassion to immigrants, no matter their status, is a requirement of following Jesus — there is no alternative.
14. *"When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."* (Lev. 19:33-34). These are the strong words of a God who loves everyone and desperately wants us to understand that everyone is made in God's own divine image. The way we treat immigrants and refugees is the way we treat Jesus himself. There may be political,

economic, and personal reasons for an unwillingness to love immigrants, but according to Jesus, there are no spiritual ones.

15. Who are the 'strangers', 'sojourners' and 'foreigners' in our midst today? They are the:
 - Displaced persons — those who have been forced to leave their homes (community) due to violent conflict, war, or a natural disaster.
 - Refugees — people who have been forced to leave their nation due to violent conflict or war.
 - Migrants — those who have chosen to leave their home country, mainly to escape poverty.
 - Asylum seekers — individuals who ask to live in another country to escape severe religious or political persecution or another violation of their human rights.
 - Stateless persons — those who are not a citizen under the laws of any country.
16. Our stance towards immigrants directly reflects our stance towards God. But like the earliest followers of Jesus, being Christ-like often means opposing man-made authorities and even contradicting Christendom itself. Because when immigrants are the victims of xenophobia, racism, and political rhetoric, it's up to followers of Jesus to be their most fervent defenders and to love them as Jesus did and does.
17. And since we, as believers, were once strangers outside God's kingdom, we can identify with the idea of not belonging as the reason why we treat refugees or displaced people without discrimination.
18. In spite of the turbulence of the world at the present time, we also discover acts of kindness, of love, forgiveness and hospitality in places or from people we did not expect. Our Bible story gives us a visceral story of human fear, survival, hope and love. It will invite us to reflect upon the abundance of God's grace and fullness, that we can see if only we stop and look closely at what is in front of us. In the most difficult situations, inhospitable places and even in the most inhospitable people, there we will find something of God's grace.
19. Today we ask the Lord to help us live every trial sustained by the energy of faith; and to be sensitive to the many castaways of history who arrive exhausted on our shores, because we too know how to welcome them with that brotherly love that comes from the encounter with Jesus. This is what saves from the frost of indifference and inhumanity.
20. We are invited at this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity to see God working through people and places which offer unusual kindness. Our prayer for Christian unity is deeply rooted in the Bible. We pray for unity because Jesus prayed that His disciples would be one, that the world might believe (John 17:20-21). St Paul also urged the churches to which he wrote to recognise their unity in Christ, even though there was much diversity within them (1 Corinthians 12:12-27).

21. Christianity is not merely a spirituality, but a faith rooted in events in human history: the redemption of humanity and the whole of creation. The unity for which we pray therefore serves to make Christ known in the world. As we approach one another, seeking unity, we recognize that we sometimes carry baggage from history, tradition and cultural expectation, which can weigh us down and threaten to overwhelm us. There is the danger that, in the face of that experience, we might lose sight of the hope which first called us and so give up reaching for the light which Christ offers us.
22. St Paul challenged his fellow travellers, sailors, soldiers and prisoners to keep up their courage. In the face of apparent desperation and hopelessness, we are challenged to put our trust in God and allow ourselves to be held and carried through the waters. There will be times when we are broken, as individuals and as churches, and looking back we shall see not just the one set of footprints in the sand, but hundreds, as we are surrounded and supported by those who love us. There will be times when, standing in the storms of our own making, we are challenged to demonstrate unusual kindness in the face of worldly indifference. To demonstrate unusual kindness is to see the sister and brother in the monster's shame and know that they too are children of God. To demonstrate unusual kindness is to give without counting the cost, and to allow ourselves to be given unto without questioning worth.
23. As we reflect upon, and pray for, Christian unity, we acknowledge the injury that we have caused, the pain that we carry, the baggage that we must jettison. We pray for Christian unity as the place from which we can move onward in faith and in hope for the redemption of the world and the restoration of creation. We pray for openness to how God will keep moving in us and that we will not collude with indifference or inadequate approaches to faith and relationship.
24. During this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we accompany the churches of Malta, praying with and alongside them, praying also for them in their Christian journey as they seek the unity for which Christ prayed. And we rejoice with them that Malta traces its Christian origins back to the time of the Apostles. And in so doing, we enter into the drama of St Paul, those that travelled with him, and the inhabitants whom they met, to discover our shared unity, and in so doing recognise the importance of unusual acts of kindness that bear witness to the Gospel of peace and reconciliation.
25. Unusual kindness shown to us breaks down walls and prejudices we may have and allows us to listen and befriend the other. This gesture restores and strengthens relationships and will result in us expressing unusual kindness in return.

Amen