

**SERMON FOR THE FEAST OF THE HOLY TRINITY  
ALL SAINTS BIRKENHEAD YEAR C 2022**

A few weeks ago, there was in our church calendar the week of prayer for Christian unity. We did mention this in the intercessions, but it largely went by without much conversation. Perhaps you could sadly say there was not much unity. On reflection of this, former chaplain of Christ's College Christchurch the Reverend Bosco Peters, wrote an interesting blog post on his website [liturgy.co.nz](http://liturgy.co.nz). He started "There are places in New Zealand, when you stand on a spot, you can see about half a dozen different church buildings - different buildings for different Christian denominations. We have become immune to the scandal that this is."

What struck me about this opening paragraph was in fact our own context. If we stand here at our church, we can quite clearly see St Andrews just across the road. And if you go further up the road, you will see a Methodist Church, and so on. Of course, in some sense as Bosco says this is a scandal. Us Christians are often terrible at unity and over history we have split so many times you can almost lose count. Unity is one of our biggest issues.

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And today of course is Trinity Sunday, quite ironically a day about unity. A day set aside to reflect on God's divine nature revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Today's Gospel reading reveals this. This passage moves us from Jesus through the Spirit to us and from Jesus back to the one who sent him, the Father. The context for today's scripture as usual is important. It is a part of a long dialogue that Jesus is having with his disciples that spans almost 5 chapters of John's Gospel. Love is the overarching theme of these five chapters of comfort and instruction that Jesus shares with his friends on the night of his arrest.

John 13 begins with a reference to Jesus' love for his own to the end and builds to the threefold commandment to love. Love is linked to the giving of the Spirit in John 14. The vine/vine grower/branches metaphor of John 15 is interpreted as love, as Jesus' unity with the Father throughout John has been understood to be love, and as the sending of the Son is because God loves the world. Those who believe in Jesus are explicitly drawn into the

love of Father and Son in the prayer of John 17 so that the divine love story with the world can be made manifest in them. The Gospel today for Trinity Sunday invites us to draw all of that together.

Perhaps the reason that Jesus takes almost 5 chapters to explain to his disciples the importance of love and unity is that unfortunately as we know the disciples so often miss the mark regarding these virtues. They squabble over who is to be the greatest. They rebuke Jesus for saying that he must suffer. And as we are all aware they abandon each other when Jesus is arrested. Love and unity, even for those closest to Jesus is a difficult task.

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And so, we may rightly think what chance do we have 2000 years later at this love and unity stuff? We know the deep and painful history of the church, from schism to reformation to an almost incalculable number of denominations and sects now existing. The Reverend Bosco Peters in fact in his article writes about how we got here. He muses “often there is a sort of capitalist lens on these different denominations: different personality types need different denominations, so this justification goes.

Competition is good. This row of competing church buildings is viewed akin to a row of different supermarkets, or the row of different car sales yards, or of different restaurants.

Anglicans (and others?) have been sucked into this capitalist paradigm in providing different services at different times (or, in some cases, in different buildings on the same property at the same time).”

“Implicit is a capitalist-type competitiveness: just as the different car yards compete for the people wanting a car, so churches compete for the people wanting a church service. Denominations – says this approach – are like different flavours of ice cream, and different people just prefer different flavours. Each denomination is providing a different flavour, otherwise some personalities would never get ice cream.”

Unfortunately, the church has replicated modern societies mindset of ‘if it doesn’t work how I want it to work I can just go to the competitor’ when it comes to church. I would say this is fundamentally unchristian and is one of the reasons why we are in the mess that we are in.

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But of course, this is not new. As mentioned even the disciples of Jesus struggled with disunity. They wanted their own way, their own needs met and so they often quarrelled. They wouldn't have known it as the 'capitalist mindset' but the fruits were the same. And so Jesus goes to great lengths to explain to them the importance of unity. But not just unity, but also love. For without love, unity is difficult. And so today we get a picture of the eternal love flowing from the one who sends, to the sent one, to the Spirit who dwells in us. It is this abiding love, the indwelling of God's spirit through the sacraments of baptism and confirmation that in turn makes us love-bearers for, in, and with God. sent out ourselves into the world to bear witness to it with our love.

The loving circle of God—the Father, the Son–Word, and the Spirit–breath—draws us into itself and moves us out into the world with it. And so we are to be reflections of not only this love of the Trinity but also the unity that exists within. At the heart of God is a unity of love that is willing to suffer for the other. A willingness to set aside ones own desires and privileges for the other.

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And so the challenge for us as Christians today is that we are called to reflect this unity of love ourselves. The hard part? Well it is not always about getting what we want. It is about giving up something for another. If there is any solution to our problems of disunity, then this is a good start. The good news of the gospel is that we don't do this alone. We believe that God is with us through his Holy Spirit guiding and strengthening us when needed. However, this is not just passive. We must work with the spirit to bring about this unity and love.

What would our churches look like if we resisted the 'capitalist' approach to worship? If we were able to put aside some of our preferences to support and encourage each other by attending worship more regularly, giving more readily and been open to where God may be leading us? As we face an uncertain future made even more uncertain due to Covid, are there ways we can live out the Trinity of love and unity here in our community of faith?

Now I don't mean we just put up with bad or sloppy worship, or indifferent pastors. But we must somehow, I believe return to the Anglican concept of 'Common

Worship' as a source of unity. We have a New Zealand prayer book which the statutes of the church ask we follow. Even the vestments we wear are mandated. But as you will know many Anglican churches don't follow these statutes in the name of preference-based worship. However, this again is the 'capitalist' mindset that is so dangerous to our sense of unity. I don't see some Anglican churches returning to good common worship practices anytime soon however we as a congregation can recommit ourselves to this important Anglican concept.

The idea that you can go to any Anglican Church in New Zealand and perhaps with slight variation you will at least be at a service you find familiar. This also informs us as a congregation. We have been having the discussion about having 2 services on a Sunday, 8am and 9.30am. These time differences had a purpose at one point where the old prayer book was once used at the 8am for those who preferred it. But now we have almost indistinguishable services based on a preference of time. How wonderful would it be as we are doing today to join together for worship and express our unity and love, reflecting that very unity and love found in the God of Trinity?

The Gospel today presents the Trinity as a way of understanding God for, with, and in us and of understanding ourselves for, with, and in God as daughters and sons who have seen what it means to be children of God in Jesus.

Through Jesus' example, teaching, and love, we are made to understand and to rejoice in God's love for us and to learn to love one another as neighbours dwelling close to the heart of God with the Son in the unity of love.

May we truly be a community of the Trinity, unity in love.

Amen