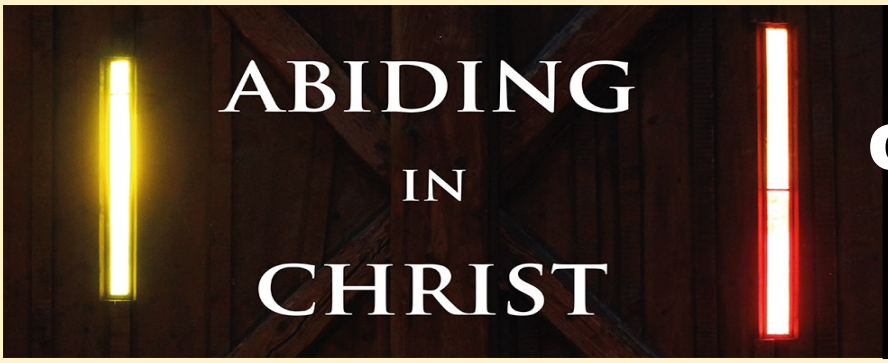


Prayer for Christian Unity

January 18 - 25 2021

Our spiritual well-being is as important as our physical well-being. In the past year both of these have been seriously challenged: the COVID-19 pandemic has caused us to be careful about our own health, taking precautions such as washing hands and wearing facemasks and maintaining social distance. Some of us have been ill or have lost someone close to us. Meanwhile the working lives of many have been disrupted and families kept apart, often at huge personal cost. Perhaps it has made us all more anxious about our health and more aware of our vulnerability.

At the same time church buildings have been closed and worship has been taking place online. Opportunities to worship and pray together have been seriously curtailed. We may well be feeling a sense of isolation from God as well as our neighbour. The period of lockdown that we have lived through has caused us to take a step back to think again about our priorities and the things and people that we value, that make our lives whole. The long periods of absence from extended family and friends, and the inability to share a meal together or celebrate a birthday or a wedding, are examples of this.

When it comes to our spiritual life, what is it that is most important for our well-being? As Church life was to a large extent paused for the first time for most people, what does it mean to be part of the one Church, the Body of Christ when all we see of our sisters and brothers are on the screen of a laptop?

When the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity invited the sisters of the Community of Grandchamp in Switzerland to produce the material for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity for 2021 they could not have foreseen the pandemic and its impact. Yet the Sisters of Grandchamp have offered us something uniquely precious: an opportunity to engage with a form of prayer that is both very ancient and yet at the same time so apposite for our times. The ancient rhythm of prayer found in many religious orders and their traditions teach us that when we pray, we pray not just on our own or with those who share the same physical space, but with the whole Church, the Body of Christ, of Christians in other places and in different times. This rhythm of prayer, with its traditional forms of structure, hymns and psalms and perhaps most importantly, silence, might well be an important gift from the ancient Church to the Church of today struggling with pandemics and lockdowns and more widely with some of the serious challenges that our world faces, most particularly climate change, racism and poverty.

This tradition of prayer and spirituality, despite the things that hurt and separate us, invites us into shared prayer and silence together. Surely a most precious gift in troubled times.

Come with us this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and enter into a place of community and blessing. Simply “be” in this place and be carried by the prayer and the reality that it is God, in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, who carries us and accompanies us. Always.

Continued ….

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 2021 has been prepared by the Monastic Community of Grandchamp in Switzerland. The theme that was chosen, “Abide in my love and you shall bear much fruit”, is based on John 15:1-17 and expresses Grandchamp Community’s vocation to prayer, reconciliation and unity in the Church and the human family.

The Grandchamp Community has its origins in Europe in the 1930s, when a group of women of the Reformed tradition sought to rediscover the importance of silence and listening to the Word of God. Today the community has fifty sisters, all women from different generations, Church traditions, countries and continents. In their diversity the sisters are a living parable of communion. They remain faithful to a life of prayer, life in community and the welcoming of guests. The sisters share the grace of their monastic life with visitors and volunteers who go to Grandchamp for a time of retreat, silence, healing or in search of meaning. In producing the material for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity for 2021, the sisters are inviting churches across the world to enter into their tradition of prayer and silence that is rooted in the ancient traditions of the Catholic Church.

Jesus said to the disciples, “abide in my love” (Jn 15:9). He abides in the love of the Father (Jn 15:10) and desires nothing other than to share this love with us: “I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (Jn 15:15b). Grafted into the vine, which is Jesus himself, the Father becomes our vinedresser who prunes us to make us grow. This describes what happens in prayer. The Father is the centre of our lives, who centres our lives. He prunes us and makes us whole, and whole human beings give glory to the Father.

Abiding in Christ is an inner attitude that takes root in us over time. It demands space to grow. It can be overtaken by the struggle for the necessities of life and it is threatened by the distractions, noise, activity and the challenges of life.

We live in a time that is both troubling and magnificent, an often dangerous time where we are challenged by pandemics, wars, violence, poverty, racism and climate change. Yet as Christians seeking reconciliation, justice and peace, we also know the full value of a spiritual life, have an immense responsibility and must realize it, unite and help each other create forces of calmness, refuges of peace, vital centres where the silence of people calls on the creative word of God. It is a question of life and death.

Though we, as Christians, abide in the love of Christ, we also live in a creation that groans as it waits to be set free (cf. Romans 8). In the world we witness the evils of suffering and conflict. Through solidarity with those who suffer we allow the love of Christ to flow through us. The paschal mystery bears fruit in us when we offer love to our brothers and sisters and nurture hope in the world.

Spirituality and solidarity are inseparably linked. Abiding in Christ, we receive the strength and wisdom to act against structures of injustice and oppression, to fully recognize ourselves as brothers and sisters in humanity, and to be creators of a new way of living, with respect for and communion with all of creation.

The summary of the rule of life that the sisters of Grandchamp recite together each morning begins with the words “pray and work that God may reign”. Prayer and everyday life are not two separate realities but are meant to be united. All that we experience is meant to become an encounter with God.

The following are resources that you can use in your home to participate in the spirit of Prayer for Christian Unity.

"You did not choose me but I chose you" (John 15:16a)

Genesis 12:1-4 The call of Abraham

John 1:35-51 The call of the first disciples



Meditation

The start of the journey is an encounter between a human being and God, between the created and the Creator, between time and eternity.

Abraham heard the call: "Go to the land I will show you". Like Abraham we are called to leave that which is familiar and go to the place that God has prepared in the depths of our hearts. Along the way, we become more and more ourselves, the people God has wanted us to be from the beginning. And by following the call that is addressed to us, we become a blessing for our loved ones, our neighbours, and the world.

The love of God seeks us. God became human in Jesus, in whom we encounter the gaze of God. In our lives, as in the Gospel of John, God's call is heard in different ways. Touched by his love, we set out. In this encounter, we walk a path of transformation - the bright beginning of a relationship of love that is always started anew.

"One day you understood that, without your being aware of it, a yes had already been inscribed in your innermost depths. And so you chose to go forward in the footsteps of Christ…. In silence in the presence of Christ, you heard him say, 'Come, follow me; I will give you a place to rest your heart.'"

Called by God

Prayer: Jesus Christ, you seek us, you wish to offer us your friendship and lead us to a life that is ever more complete. Grant us the confidence to answer your call so that we may be transformed and become witnesses of your tenderness for the world.

Questions:

- Have you ever been aware that God was asking you or someone you know to begin a new journey in life – whether literally moving to somewhere else, or 'changing direction' in some other way? How did you respond?
- What changes could your church or group of churches make to empower God's people to walk more faithfully the path God has set for you, or to discern God's guidance more clearly?
- What are some of the stories of the 'new' members of your community, whether they have crossed a county boundary or journeyed across continents to get there?

GO & DO

Global: Get informed about and take action on global refugee and asylum issues and campaigns.

Local: Participate in any hospitality being offered locally to those who have had no choice but to go on a long journey to find safety in an unfamiliar place across the world.

Personal: Spend time exploring what is unfamiliar to you in another Christian tradition and which might help lead you to greater understanding and unity.

"Abide in me as I abide in you" (John 15: 4a)

Ephesians 3:14-21 May Christ dwell in our hearts

Luke 2:41-52 Mary treasured all these things



Meditation

The encounter with Jesus gives rise to the desire to stay with him and to abide in him: a time in which fruit matures.

Being fully human, like us Jesus grew and matured. He lived a simple life, rooted in the practices of his Jewish faith. In this hidden life in Nazareth, where apparently nothing extraordinary happened, the presence of the Father nourished him.

Mary contemplated the actions of God in her life and in that of her son. She treasured all these things in her heart. Thus, little by little, she embraced the mystery of Jesus.

We too need a long period of maturation, an entire lifetime, in order to plumb the depths of Christ's love, to let him abide in us and for us to abide in him.

Without our knowing how, the Spirit makes Christ dwell in our hearts. And it is through prayer, by listening to the word, in sharing with others, by putting into practice what we have understood, that the inner being is strengthened.

"Letting Christ descend into the depths of our being … He will penetrate the regions of the mind and the heart, he will reach our flesh unto our innermost being, so that we too will one day experience the depths of mercy."

Prayer: Holy Spirit, May we receive in our hearts the presence of Christ, and cherish it as a secret of love. Nourish our prayer, enlighten our reading of Scripture, act through us, so that the fruits of your gifts can patiently grow in us.

Questions:

- The Bible tells us very little about Jesus' youth and early adulthood, when he seems to have lived an ordinary life in Nazareth. How are you conscious of God's presence with you in the everyday things of life?
- In your church or group of churches how do you nurture your children and young people to walk with God in their everyday lives, and how could you do this better?
- What does the churches having a 'presence' together in the community look like in your area?

GO & DO

Global: As people of faith think about how you can work together for the day when all can know a full and abundant human life.

Local: Consider how the churches in your area can be more child friendly spaces.

Personal: Give thanks and pray for the children you know.



Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Bob Fyffe, General Secretary, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland