

‘That they all may be one’ (John 17. 21)

Today’s gospel contains the motto of the Church of South India: ‘that they all may be one’. Two words in this motto call our attention: ‘all’ and ‘one’.

The word ‘all’ points to plurality - but the word ‘one’ points to oneness - unity. In the Nicene Creed we proclaim that we believe in ‘one’ holy catholic and apostolic church. We know that here the word catholic stands not for a denomination – but the word refers to ‘wholeness’. And, when the apostles affirmed that the church is one, in reality the church was not in unity. The New Testament church that existed in places like Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, and Ephesus – had neither uniformity of worship nor structure, or even a uniform theology. So, the affirmation that they made then – and the affirmation that we make in the Creed is not an acceptance of the status quo of the divided churches - but to work for and look forward to a Church which is really one.

The Church of South India is an expression of such a vision materialised in India in 1947 by the coming together of four major Churches namely the Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational. For Indians, like people of many other countries, denominationalism (rivalry between different denominations) is something that they inherited from the West (from the missionaries). In Indian religious traditions we do not see a competition within the same religion – by disowning and refuting another stream - for example, between the worshippers of Krishna, Shiva, Brahma of the same religion, Hinduism (we do not see any rivalry).

If we look into the history, it was St Thomas the Apostle who planted Christianity in India (in Kerala) in AD 52 (according to tradition). We do not know for sure how the worship patterns were then – but the Christians had contact with East Syrian Persian church from the third century - and then, after fifteen centuries, the Roman Catholic missions came with the Portuguese followed by the landing of Vasco de Gama in 1498. They made the St Thomas Christians give up their Syrian Liturgy for the Latin rite. They demanded that the converts not only accept their faith but also their language, names, dress and culture. Protestant missionaries started their work in south India after three centuries... i.e., during the eighteen century – and slowly almost all denominations reached India – and gradually the Indian church reflected the divided state of their parent churches. Meanwhile, many new churches also came into being in India as a result of schisms and splits within the Churches; Jacobite, Orthodox, and Mar Thomas were formed thus from the St Thomas heritage. But the Church of South India comes as the first expression of visible unity...of coming together of the divided Church. Discussions for further unity continued with the Lutherans, Baptists, CNI (Church of North India), Mar Thoma, and Orthodox Churches – but did not bring any visible result.

This history of the CSI (which may not be known to all its members) is something that they can be proud of – but a responsibility as well that they have to fulfil (to be the uniting agents) not only within the Indian soil – but wherever they go. It’s a call to its members to uphold this vision of the CSI - the hope of one church – and continue to work for it wherever they go. It is not a call only to the members in Adelaide who

responded positively to their initial call – but all members of the CSI in Australia and beyond – it's a global call - to join locally, first with their parent Churches and become uniting agents wherever they are present.

But what makes such integration difficult for any church is the differences that they may find in faith articulation. We get confused between the content of faith and the cultural forms in which the faith is brought in to our lives. And we focus on the 10% of differences that we may find – and ignore the 90% of things that we have in common. While we proclaim that Jesus is the only way – we often think that the church we belong to is 'the legitimate way' leading to 'the only way'. And this thinking is not helpful to the oneness that we hope for – the oneness that Jesus prayed for.

The Lord of the Church is same: Jesus, the Christ, The ministry of the church is one: that is the continuance of the ministry of Christ. The goal of the church is one: the Kingdom of God - participating with God in God's mission in Christ's way towards the consummation of the Kingdom of God – the realm of God on earth.

In today's reading we find Jesus praying for his disciples (during his last days). Not just for those 12 disciples who were with him at that time – but Jesus prays 'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word'... 'that they all may be one'.

Here what Jesus proposes is not a oneness of uniformity. But a unity in diversity. Jesus prays, 'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,' God the Creator is Spirit – and Jesus was in flesh. The nature of these two persons in the Trinity – are different here. So the unity that Jesus expounds here is not the unity attained by uniformity - but the perfect unity of distinct persons bound together by love resulting in complete communion. This unity does not demand uniformity – this unity preserves the richness of diversity. What is rejected here as evil is not diversity – but disunity. Variety in worship forms and difference in expressions of faith are diversities born of church's attempts to be effective and faithful in different historic and cultural contexts. They enrich the Church universal. Scripture invites 'all treasures of nations be brought to the worship of God' (Is 60.11). So what is rejected is not diversity or variety but disunity.

Unity begins in what we are already united in believing. We need to give less emphasis on differences and put more emphasis on things that we have in common. We all should stop thinking that our denomination is the Vine – and all others are branches – but Jesus is the Vine and all of us are branches. We are not complete without the other branches. The one Church that we proclaim in the Creed – and Jesus prayed for - is not complete without each and every church that exists today. If we realise that - we will be open to learn from each other. While we cherish the tradition that we belong to, as we should – we will be open or we will not mind to be called as a Catholic, Pentecostal, Baptist, or Orthodox. Because all these together constitute the 'one' church. We will be able to... and we should be able to see the unity that binds all of us together... Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.