

**Sermon for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2024** by Revd Dr David G Palmer, Chair of Churches Together in Swadlincote, South Derbyshire, delivered at the Church of Ss Peter and Paul on Sunday, 21<sup>st</sup> January at the 7.00pm Service:

*I thank Fr Neil and the people of this Church for their invitation to me to speak at this year's service. And I thank you also for hosting this event once again.*

*I also thank Fr Neil for including the opening hymn I suggested, 'Come all who look to Christ today', sung to Tallis' Canon. For the last twenty years or so, the writer of the hymn, Revd Dr Richard G Jones, has been resident in our Notts and Derby Methodist District. My pleasure has been to sit with him at our Synods. He'd been a theological college principal, a Chairman of the District, Methodism's President, a leading ecumenical and a lovely, lovely man. He was born in 1926 and died only in 2022.*

So, we meet to observe another Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity.

This Octave finds different expressions in different places, depending on local circumstances. When in my ministry I had moved from Cardiff to Paisley (from Wales to Scotland) in 1990, I found out that it was the late Queen who had got the Paisley Town Centre Clergy together! She was visiting the Abbey and wanted to meet more than just the Church of Scotland Minister there. (Methodist Central Hall stands opposite the Abbey; S Mirin's (RC) Cathedral is just up the road from there; round the corner is Wallneuk North Church of Scotland Church; to the south of the centre was Coates' Memorial Baptist Church, with the Episcopal Church of Scotland just a street or two away and the Moravian Church to the east of the centre which moved into a beautiful Charles Rennie Mackintosh style church building while I was there.) Early in my time in Paisley, we expanded the Town Centre group to include all the churches of Paisley (all that wanted to join us, that is). It became PACT, Paisley Action of Churches Together. And we took on a project: The Firehouse! We purchased a disused Fire Station (for £1) from the Strathclyde Regional Council (with the intervention of the Secretary of State for Scotland). We got down to developing a Youth Music Centre to combat drug-taking and related murders. (Then, Paisley was the murder capital of Great Britain. Also my wife, Sue, was working as a Health Visitor then in Ferguslie where most of the murders were committed.)

Churches Together in Swadlincote and District has its own history and today it has its own programme of activities. We're meeting as a Leadership Team this coming Tuesday (during this Week of Prayer) when we will hear reports from our Assemblies' Team, our Chaplaincy Team and receive updates on our Warm Room Initiative. We shall hear about Mission Initiatives of churches that are being funded by us. And we will make plans to continue our Christian witness as churches together.

I've had many happy experiences, all through my life, in engaging with denominations and churches which chose to do things together. In my early twenties in London, my wife and I matured a lot in the faith as we involved ourselves in the Hornsey Council of Churches. It included the usual RCs, the C of E, Methodists, Salvation Army, the YMCA, the URC and Baptists; it also had Moravians, Mennonites and Apostolic Pentecostals.

**PACT was an acronym** that proved itself in Scotland. I have **another this evening for us: ULCERS (U-L-C-ERS)**. But first let's consider the reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians, 2.11-16 which Major Marjory read for us.

Peter and Paul were not really known to each other. And what Paul did know about Peter annoyed him greatly, so much so that he publicly challenged Peter over his behaviour towards gentiles - which changed when his brother Jews were present!

It could be this scripture that prompted the idea of an Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity in the mind of an Anglo-Catholic, Fr Paul Wattson, in 1908. He came up with an eight-day period for prayer which opened with a Feast day of St Peter and closed with a Feast Day of St Paul. It is very fitting that we're here today, I think, in the Church of Ss Peter and Paul. (The Feast Day of Paul's Conversion remains the 25<sup>th</sup>, but because of a restructuring under Pope John XXIII, the 18<sup>th</sup>'s Feast of The Chair of St Peter is no more.) The Octave of Prayer has always been about bringing Christians together, along with their differences, even also to acknowledge our faults and failings, yes?

Churches, then, have been praying for Christian Unity since 1908. As individuals, we've been adding our prayers since. But clearly, it's one thing to pray and another to see change happen. As Rabbi Lionel Blue, on Radio 4's Thought for the Day, would often joke, 'You have to meet God half-way. If you want to win the lottery, you have to help God by buying a ticket!' **To 'ULCERS' we turn!**

I remember from my mid-teens, my mum saying to me, '**David, you are giving your dad ULCERS!**' I didn't think it was fair then. And I don't now. My father suffered stomach ulcers linked more to his work and the stress of his life-style than to anything I could have been responsible for. In the 1960s, many boys like me grew their hair long! I swapped my violin for a guitar and I got on stage with the 'Black Watch' playing at Youth Clubs, School dances and the like. My clothing saw some changes too. But I considered myself a thoughtful and dutiful son, all the same.

I'm commending 'ULCERS' to you as a suitable acronym for today. Over the years, preachers have preached: in Essentials, Unity; in Non-essentials, Liberty; and in All Things, Charity. Unity in essentials; Liberty in inessentials and Charity in all things. We have the U, the L and the C. And the ERS? I put it to you that they stand for our hesitation: ER, ER, ER! We are happy *to pray* for Christian Unity, but we have been hesitating in making it come about. Today, I am saying (prompted by my mum), '**Brothers and Sisters, we are giving our heavenly 'Dad' ULCERS!**'

We are indebted to a German Lutheran theologian of the early seventeenth century for the U, L and C of this teaching. His name was Rupert Melden. (If you want to look him up, you might need his Latin name, Rupertus Meldenius.)

In contemplating Unity, Liberty and Charity in the past, preachers have turned to Paul's First Letter (as we have it) to the Corinthians. There we see 1) that unity was lacking (the folk were ready to follow one person and not another – these divisions were ugly and unhelpful); 2) Christians even took each other to a public court to settle their domestic differences; 3) some could eat meat that they bought from the market knowing that it had been sacrificed to idols, but many could not; and 4) the Lord's Supper, even, didn't bring them together in love and unity! Other Letters of Paul add further divisions, like the keeping or not keeping of 'special days', such as full-moon days.

But it is with 1 Corinthians that we stay. Within our churches, as individuals we have our own particular passions, yes? Some support one thing, others get absorbed in something else. Mostly our passion comes from our experiences of life - the death, say, of a child, a mission-visit abroad, something that has been life-changing for us. My passion is to see that the writers of the New

Testament get justice, that their texts are read as they intended. Their texts are disciplined. My argument is that our reading of them is anything but.

With the print-out that you have (hopefully, in your hands already), from 1 Corinthians 13, we have Paul's best help (as he wanted it to be read) to us to deal with the difficulty of knowing what were the Essentials and Inessentials of Christian Faith and Living. It is, of course, THE MORE EXCELLENT WAY OF CHARITY/LOVE.

It demonstrates to me, that there is only one definition of 'church' that really works: 'the church is a circle with a centre and no circumference'. I hope you get it! The Centre is Christ Jesus; he showed us pure love.

*To conclude the sermon/study, we read the passage together aloud, piece by piece, stopping to observe its form and emphases, as well as its closing (Shakespearean) rhyming couplet.*

1 Corinthians 13 is never presented as the writer intended. Translators disrupt the poetic flow of the passage by switching and swapping words. And presenters of the passage invariably include 13.13. But 13.13 begins the following passage! Its inclusion (with 13.1-12) is a distraction which undermines the writer's purpose here.

Paul is trying to say that *in our lifetimes* we must never let differences in our understanding cause division in the church, for we can know, or prophecy, only 'in part', even with the help of spiritual gifts. The key is: 'Love - never - fails'.

The handout is attached:

# 1 Corinthians 13.1-12: a Translation in Literal English of 'THE MORE EXCELLENT WAY'

| A Introduction                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | B First Development                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | B' Second, Completing Development                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>If in the tongues of men I speak <span style="float: right;">a A</span><br/> and of angels,<br/> <u>but love I have not</u>, <span style="float: right;">b</span><br/> I have become <span style="float: right;">(a) b'</span><br/> a clanging gong <span style="float: right;">(b)</span><br/> or a crashing symbol. <span style="float: right;">(b')</span></p> <p><u>And if</u> I have prophecy <span style="float: right;">B</span><br/> and know all mysteries<br/> and all knowledge,<br/> <u>and if</u> I have all faith,<br/> so as to remove mountains,<br/> <u>but love I have not</u>,<br/> <u>I am nothing</u>.</p> <p><u>And if</u> I dole out all my goods <span style="float: right;">B'</span><br/> <u>and if</u> I give up my body,<br/> in order that it might be burned,<br/> <u>but love I have not</u>,<br/> <u>I am profited nothing</u>.</p> | <p><u>Love</u> suffers long; <span style="float: right;">A</span><br/> <u>love</u> is kind;<br/> <u>love</u> is not jealous.</p> <p>It does not vaunt itself: <span style="float: right;">B</span><br/> it is not puffed up.<br/> It does not act unbecomingly:<br/> it does not seek the things of itself.<br/> It is not provoked:<br/> it does not reckon evil.</p> <p>It does not rejoice over wrong, <span style="float: right;">B'</span><br/> but rejoices in the truth.<br/> It covers all things;<br/> it believes all things.<br/> It hopes all things;<br/> it endures all things.</p> | <p><u>Love</u> <span style="float: right;">A</span><br/> never<br/> fails.</p> <p>But whether prophecies: <span style="float: right;">B</span><br/> they will be abolished.<br/> Or tongues:<br/> they will cease.<br/> Or knowledge:<br/> it will be abolished.<br/> <u>For in part we</u> know<br/> and <u>in part we</u> prophecy.</p> <p>But <u>when</u> comes the perfect thing, <span style="float: right;">B'</span><br/> the thing <u>in part</u> will be abolished.<br/> <u>When</u> I was a child I spoke like a child,<br/> I thought as a child,<br/> I reasoned as a child.<br/> <u>When</u> I became a man,<br/> I abolished the things of the child.</p> <p><u>For</u> we see<br/> now through a mirror in a puzzling way,<br/> but then face to face.<br/> Now <u>I know in part</u><br/> but then <u>I shall fully understand</u>,<br/> as also <u>I am fully understood</u>.</p> |