



unity not uniformity

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples

I wonder what you think about unity. What it is, whether it's necessary, what it looks like in life, work, family, church. Unity is a theme that is evident today in the gospel. And so I wonder what it means. It feels a bit distant, a bit conceptual, a bit unemotional – perhaps not that interesting?

Do you personally feel “united” with anyone or any cause or any organisation? And what does that feel like?

Unity is talked about a lot – especially in politics – especially in political parties and where power is exercised. In the run up to the local elections on Thursday, it's timely to reflect that we, as an electorate, historically punish parties that seem not to be unified.

Corporate culture talks a lot about unity too. Often these days expressed in the language of shared values. *We are a values driven business* – said the CEO of TSB this week as their customers raged against the IT system that caused such distress.

If you go into BP's head office in our parish in St James's Square – and I'm only highlighting them because I was there not long ago asking them about paying their cleaners the living wage - you will see 5 words in the foyer

Safety | Respect | Excellence | Courage | One Team

Whatever the strength of the individual, we will accomplish more together. We put the team ahead of our personal success and commit to building its capability. We trust each other to deliver on our respective obligations.

Unity of purpose, unity of understanding, team building and selflessness – these are really key concepts not only in the private sector business world but in workplaces, associations, clubs.

The five behaviours set out by London Underground include “collaborative” – a strong emphasis on teamwork, working together. And for any of you who work in the NHS you'll recognise the strapline “working together for patients” , again with an emphasis on the unity of purpose and team work that is required to achieve what the NHS thinks it is there to do.

Unity of purpose and team work – what's not to like?

Well if we're listening to the gospel this morning, then it raises deep questions for us about unity of purpose or building a unified community; and honestly, the kind of management speak I've mentioned isn't applicable. We have to listen to the gospel in deeper terms and not just assume that the unity talked about here is the unity we find everywhere else.

There's a lot of discussion in the C of E at the moment about how far management assumptions, values and practices should be evident in the church. I was asked at one year's APCM by one of you, that following the Archbishop of Canterbury's plan that clergy should be offered an MBA in Business studies and marketing, how you as the congregation would be able to tell if I'd done it.

For the record, I haven't (yet).

And before I set off on this topic, it is really important to say that because St James's employs 25 people full time part time and as contractors, it's vital that we are able to operate in that good management mode, knowledgeable about HR law, property law, building a staff team that can operate at a high level of excellence to keep this

central London parish, site, historic building, garden and community, flourishing.

But the unity that is in the gospel is of a different calibre and character. And it's that unity that I want to explore this morning, in the context of Daniellah's baptism too.

Church unity is not an uncontroversial topic. In the service of unity, the church has torn itself almost apart in its arguments about women, whether we can be ordained or not; and is now still completely unresolved over the differing views held about sexuality and how we express ourselves as people with a variety of identities and fluidities.

In a commitment to church unity, people have been hurt; and unity has sometimes seemed, to me at least, to have become an idol, which has suppressed calls for justice in its service. But unity, somehow, *is* a gospel imperative – so how can we rescue it from the tendency to be totalitarian that we can recognise when unity becomes uniformity imposed from above in politics, business or religion.

Jesus is at his most mystical and poetic in John's gospel – and these weeks after Easter, we are listening to his "I am" sayings. Today he says I am the true vine. You are the branches.

This is a bit weird.

Because the branches of a vine *are* the vine. *I am the true vine You are the branches* doesn't really make sense if we think about it for a moment. It's paradoxical, strange, impossible. This kind of unity isn't about team building between individuals to achieve a goal; it's a statement about what it's like to live life together: it's about shared roots, the production of "fruit"; which again Jesus doesn't really define; it's about pruning, in order to flourish, about the potential of rich wine-making, to follow the metaphor through, it's what you might describe as an intoxicating call to live – together - to love life – together. I now have Bob Marley One Love as the musical backdrop to this sermon.....

For a human being to say they are a vine is clearly symbolic language. It's not completely clear what it means – for Jesus's Jewish audience, it would have had deep resonances with the description of the people of Israel throughout the Hebrew Scriptures as the vine, or vineyard. Many commentaries have Jesus saying this in relation to his own landscape and with the future

suffering that he is facing himself; pruning being a metaphor for martyrdom.

This gospel however is issuing an invitation to you and to me in this city, in this society and this church – to be one – to live Christ-shaped lives and to be one with each other, not dependent on our words or our views or our politics or our interests or jobs.

And because you have come along to church, our oneness is expressed in particular ways. We are bound to one another by our baptism and by sharing the eucharist. Two sacraments that are in themselves mysterious, inexplicable, beautiful; expressing a way of living that defies explanation or analysis.

Just as I walked into BP's offices and saw their words on the wall, and read about their desire for unity, for us, our unity is not expressed in soundbites, or words on the wall, but in the symbolic action that we take together.

In a few minutes, we will baptise Daniellah: we won't just talk about water, oil and light, we will use the actual physical elements. Real water, real oil, real candlelight. If I asked each of you what connections these deep symbols have for you, you would all have different answers. But we are one with each other knowing that we need water and light to live; and that we find richness and consolation in the preciousness of oil, blessed at Easter, poured on our wounds.

If you picture a plant such as a vine, then this kind of unity is organic, mystical, always growing. My life fuses with your life for this time we pray together. I am with you. You are with me. We are "in" Christ. And how do we explore this? How does it work? Not by talking about it but by living it.

I walk into this congregation and see not words on a wall but you. However you're doing today – whether you're well or sick, whether you're feeling energetic or exhausted; whether you are basking in the light or struggling in the darkness – it is living your Christ shaped life that gives substance and meaning to these sacraments.

Water, Oil, Light – for Daniellah - these symbols of baptism, and the phrase we use is that we are baptised into the death and life of Christ – remind us of our call to live Christ shaped lives.

And then we will eat and drink together - we won't just tell the story – we'll actually eat and drink together – or bless one another - and it will

include drinking wine – what Jesus called the cup of suffering.

As a church, we have a plan – and words – to try to express what we are about. And these are based in the life of Jesus Christ – we have said that our common life is marked by celebration, forgiveness, doubt, discernment – underpinned by prayer and friendship. Imagine seeing those words on the wall at BP, or on the underground, or in a hospital waiting room. I'm not saying ours are better – but I am saying that this way of living is only authentic when we put them into practice. It's a distinctive way of living:

Living our words mean we will never miss an opportunity to have a party – there is cake and bubbles after today's service for instance... It also means we have a commitment to ask forgiveness of one another – it means that we believe doubt is an essential part of faith – that we know we have choices to make – but that we want to make friends here and learn to pray together.

That kind of unity is never going to be found in uniformity or even in a team building exercise. An insistence on sameness quickly tips over into mini totalitarianism. And the church has often been guilty of this – is still sometimes – trying to impose unity by uniformity – of how we worship, what we say, how we believe.

This is not the language of Christ – nor is it the life we are invited into.

The unity between us is organic, like a vine; our common life is marked by our desire to become more and more rooted, deeply in the soil that we

can call love. What unites us is our commitment to one another to eat and drink together at this Eucharist, and to learn to pray not only with our eyes closed, but also with our eyes open, seeing others as God sees them and learning to see ourselves as the precious people we have been made to be.

And by taking part in these sacraments, which are the distinctive and unique actions of church, we learn to act in the world to enlarge our sympathies, deepen our compassion and help one another prepare for the cost that loving one another unconditionally inevitably brings.

It is our privilege at St James's to accompany people as they seek asylum and safety in this country. And so as part of that journey, it is our privilege to baptise Daniellah today, welcoming her into the kind of unity which will never ask her to be the same as anyone else; which will delight in her uniqueness and difference; which will, we pray, deepen her empathy for people, and enlarge her sympathies for the created world of which she is a part.

May she, with us, grow into a more Christ-shaped life, ready to bear the cost of loving, open hearted and open minded, ready to celebrate at the drop of a hat, ready to forgive and beg forgiveness, ready, as Christ was ready, even to the end, to keep hard promises, to be at one with all that lives and in celebrating that unity, make real friends.

Lucy Winkett