

This is a game of two halves – as I believe football commentators occasionally find themselves saying. In today's first half we hear the good news of Christ revealed to his own people – epitomised by this taking place in the town of Nazareth where he had been brought up and the initial reaction is favourable. Next week we'll hear that, in the second half, the game takes an entirely unexpected course, when Jesus, the Christ, elucidates just exactly what this good news entails. In today's first half the quotation from Isaiah is well received – who wouldn't wish good news for the poor, the captives, the blind and the downtrodden. Perhaps the people of Nazareth, under the yoke of Roman rule, or at least that of their Herodian surrogates, identified with these categories – and certainly this had been Judah and Israel's experience throughout history – always the underdog, the David against Goliath. It's the story of an ethnic grouping always having to fight for survival. And this after all is being said by Jesus, one of our very own. But wait a minute – who is he to say that 'this text is being fulfilled today even as you listen' – what authority does he have for this, such a text is messianic after all, only a Messiah could speak like this – and we know Jesus as merely the son of a carpenter. Jesus is fully aware of their doubts, because he's also fully aware that their interpretation of Isaiah and the Law and Scriptures generally, is very parochial, limited, ethnically based. It's a law essentially for the Jewish people only, with the hope of a Messiah sent eventually to restore Israel as a theocratic, nation state. But what Jesus goes on to say will explode this narrow, self-serving identification for he will quote Elijah going to help a pagan widow in Sidon, and Elisha curing no-one except the Syrian leper Naaman. God's brief to Israel is much wider than Israel itself – Israel is only chosen by God to be a light to the nations, to attain freedom for all. This then brings us to the call to unity in the Christian Church which has developed since – this offshoot of Judaism which is founded to recover that original universal mission of God's chosen people – as we hear so clearly in Paul's letter to the Corinthians

'In the one Spirit we were all baptised, Jews as well as Greeks, slaves as well as citizens and one Spirit was given to us all to drink.'

and echoed in the letter to the Colossians – one of the texts for this week of Prayer for Christian Unity

'you have put on a new self which will progress towards true knowledge the more it is renewed in the image of its Creator and in that image there is no room for distinction between Greek and Jew, between the circumcised and uncircumcised, or between barbarians and Scythians, slave and free. There is only Christ – he is everything and he is in everything.'
(Col.3 10-11)

So our week of prayer for Christian Unity is also a week of prayer for universal unity, for a recognition that the body of Christ is a way of picturing and restoring all people to the image of God in which we are all created, in which all become Christ. And we witness to this not only, perhaps not even firstly, by our service to one another, as the gospel passage from John makes clear for this week (John 13 1-15), but by our service to all. God's image demands it. But who am I to say this, whose father was only an electrical fitter?

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