

I Corinthians 12:12-26

WE ARE MANY, BUT WE ARE ONE

As we celebrate Australia Day each year, we, like many countries around the world, celebrate the unity we have in our diversity. Under our anthems and our flags we celebrate the values and way of life which are shared by people who have come from a wide range of different backgrounds, over many many years, to make this nation what it is today. For us in Australia, when we look at our system of government, and things like our welfare system, healthcare, education, police, as well as a very good standard of living, not to mention our religious freedoms, we do have a lot to celebrate and be thankful for. But also on this day, and I'm sure it will come up, we find that part of the diversity we celebrate means that not everyone will have the same positive views, or experiences, that many of us do. And we're not always going to like hearing that. It is great to come together and celebrate all the blessings God gives us in this land, but it's also a time when we're reminded that the unity we are celebrating is always something we are working towards.

'We are one, but we are many', is a line from one song we may hear today. I want to flip that around in relation to the reading we have here from I Corinthians 12 and say that, 'We are many, but we are one'. The unity in diversity we celebrate on our national days is a bit like that which Paul talks about when He calls the Church, that is all Christians together, the Body of Christ. But in in this case the unity goes even deeper, because it is not created by us but by God. This is a well-known and well-loved picture we have here, because we can easily relate to the fact that yes, all the parts of our bodies are different, and we need that, but they are also all just as important as one another. But despite the fact that this unity is created through the Spirit in our Baptism, and we are all called and guided by God's Word and strengthened in Holy Communion, we know we don't have a perfect unity, either in the Church or in any of our relationships. All relationships need diversity, but the problems in relationships are often created by diversity. How then does the greatest strength of a group of people, be they a church, a nation, a family, or a couple, also at times become their greatest weakness?

Several weeks ago we went to see the movie *Conclave*, based on a book by Robert Harris. It's a fictitious story which begins with the death of a Pope, and then goes through all the processes, the politics, the personalities, the intrigue which occurs as the Cardinals from around the world gather in Rome to elect the new Pontiff (the movie is actually a lot more exciting than that description might make it sound). As the cardinals are locked away at the beginning of the election process, a character name Cardinal Lawrence delivers the opening sermon to them. As a part of this he says, 'God's gift to the Church is its variety. It is this variety, this diversity of people and views which gives our Church its strength.... over the course of a long life in the service of the Church, let me tell you that the one sin I have come to fear more than any other is certainty. Certainty is the great enemy of unity. Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance.' God's gift to the Church is its variety. The one sin I have come to fear more than any other is certainty. Certainty is the great enemy of unity. Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance. Those words fit in very well with the words in our Bible reading which bring us together in union in the body of Jesus, and they can be applied to all our relationships. When I first heard them, I thought, 'Wow, that's brilliant! I can certainly think of people who need to hear and take notice of that!' But then I had to think, 'Look in the mirror. What about me? When does my certainty threaten or upset unity?' In the light of those words, I, and we, can reflect on the times, the occasions, the matters, the occurrences, when I am certain that my choice, my view, my preference, my action, is the right one. Think about it honestly, when we hold on to our certainty to the disregard of all others, how does that turn out? In this case, certainty is the great enemy of unity. Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance.

Whether again, we are talking about the unity of the Church, a nation, groups, families, or couples, we need the principles and practices we are given in this reading and elsewhere about what it means to come together, to live together, to work together, to be one together in Jesus. Unity, at any level, doesn't just happen, it needs to be worked and strived for by all. There are many ways we can be a part of that, but here are just a few:

Assume everyone is acting from the best of intentions. So often, when we don't agree with what someone is saying or doing, with what they like, with how they think things should be done, what do we

do? We attack their intentions and motives. They're just being selfish (unlike me), they just don't care, they're not worried about the bigger picture, they don't get what it's all about, they're just worried about here and now and not looking towards the future. This is one way we disregard others, on all levels of our relationships, to show ourselves and others how what we think is right and should be followed. Instead, what difference does it make when we see everyone as thinking, saying, acting as they do because they, like us, want things to turn out well for everyone. Mmm, that might be something we both have a look at ourselves about and pray for God's help with.

And then also, give the forgiveness you want to receive from others, and do receive from Jesus. We all want others to forgive us. We are all thankful for the unconditional and complete forgiveness we receive from God. But how hard can it be to pass that forgiveness on? Sometimes that's because of our pride, 'knowing' we are in the right, but other times it's because we have been genuinely, even unfairly, hurt. Forgiveness isn't always easy, but it is necessary for both the healing of relationships and for ourselves being able to move forward. The diverse people we are with in all of our groups means there will be times when forgiveness is required. Not only does God forgive us, He's also there to help us to forgive others. Mmm, that might be something we both have a look at ourselves about and pray for God's help with.

In a similar way, we want everyone to accept us, as we are, with our gifts and abilities, our quirks, our personal preferences, our likes and dislikes, we may even think or say that every group needs different people in it. But are we always as willing to accept others as we want to them to be in accepting us? Is diversity good, as long as we are all the same? In our nation we might welcome the freedom of speech, in our Church we might think it's great that we are all different parts of the one body, in relationships we might say, 'opposites attract', and in other groups we might say that, 'yes we need all different kinds of people to give us variety'. But at least sometimes, do we think, and perhaps allow it to come out in our words and actions, that as great as diversity is everything would be easier if everyone just agreed with me and was like me? Mmm, that might be something we both have a look at ourselves about and pray for God's help with.

And following on from that, see the strength in our differences. Coming back to the great picture Paul has in our reading, it seems obvious that each part of our bodies has a special role, and that there are

senses and abilities we would lose if this wasn't so. But how often do we not see the differences in all the people in our groups in the same obvious and beneficial way? Each person is as God created them to be. On a worldwide, national, Church, group, family, or couple level, God has made each individual in a way that through them He can bless others. See the differences in people, even those which might annoy you, as being a part of God enriching us all as a whole. That can be challenging, can't it? Thank God for people's differences. Look for ways you can work with their differences. Mmm, that might be something we both have a look at ourselves about and pray for God's help with.

We are many, but we are one. We say that about our nation, our groups, our relationships, and under Paul's picture of the Church as the body of Jesus we say about God's people also. This body, this unity, is created through our Baptism, when through the Holy Spirit God brings us all into His family. It's a unity we remember, celebrate, and live out when we come together for Holy Communion; together being joined to Jesus' death and resurrection as we share this meal. God created each one of us in our diversity, and He created us to have unity with one another. In Him may we find the vision of unity He desires for us all, the forgiveness for when we fail in our role in bringing unity around us, and the humility, wisdom and strength to continue to work towards what He has made us all to be, together. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- In what ways is unity a strength? In what ways can it be a challenge, even a weakness? Try to consider this based on your own relationships at all levels.
- Think about the picture Paul gives us of the Church as the body of Christ. Is there part of this image you particularly relate to or like? Is there any part of it you struggle with?
- Reflect on the ways we can each be part of preserving this unity, both in the Church and other relationships. Apply them to yourself: consider the ones you struggle with, and ones you perhaps need to practice more right now in regard to particular relationships. Bring them to God asking for forgiveness and help in any you particularly are struggling with:
 - Assume everyone is acting from the best of intentions
 - Give the forgiveness you want to receive from others, and do receive from Jesus
 - Offer the acceptance you want to receive from others, and do receive from God
 - See the strength in our differences

Pray: thank God for the unity He creates in the Church in Jesus. Thank Him for the unity in diversity He blesses us with in other relationships and groups also, including our nation. Ask God to help you to be a part of preserving and building the unity He has created.

Pastor Andrew R. Koehler
26.01.2025