

**Homily**  
**Prayer Service for Christian Unity Week**  
**Methodist Church, Cinnamon Gardens – Sunday, 22 January 2017**

I wonder whether I should begin with some words similar, to what I heard just two days ago' over the international media: Christ *first!* Kingdom of God *first!* Gospel *first!* Everything else must follow suit.

Ever since the Servant of God, Fr. Paul Wattson, Founder of the Society of the Atonement introduced the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 1908, we have been praying for the realization of this elusive dream of Faith for over a 100 years. It is born of the heart of Christ himself, who on the eve of his Redeeming Passion and Death prayed his ardent wish, those immortal words: "May they be one as you Father and I are one, that the world may believe it was You who sent me". Christian unity and the Christians being bonded in love therefore, is meant to enhance the gift of faith itself at the heart of the world: which means within the womb of history and soul of humanity. It is a missionary unity: a unity with mission! We are to be one in heart and mind that the world may experience this awesome reality of Jesus of Nazareth, as the one whom God has sent on a mission of divine compassion, tenderness, mercy and reconciliation.

The unity text of today is taken from the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter of Paul to the faithful of the city of Corinth, which on the one hand was endowed richly with many Charisms but on the other hand, was smeared by bitter rivalry of factions gathering around certain leaders: some for Paul, some for Apollos, some others to Cephas and some for Christ, fortunately! The idolatry of division is very clear: Christ is divided! So, from Paul a cry went out in pain and anguish: a cry from his deeply saddened apostolic and pastoral heart hurling at them a radical question, *the ultimate Christological question*: 'Who was it that was crucified for you? In whose name were you baptized? For, already opening the first letter, he had unconditionally proclaimed the wisdom of the cross for those who are on the path of salvation.

So we see, it is within the interior circle of believers that the sin of disunity begins. It is not others who cause us to be divided through differences in doctrine, ritual or government! In fact the theme for today had been suggested in Germany where they are celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the reform and renewal ushered in by Martin Luther. That wall of division that arose rending the seamless robe of the Redeemer is certainly difficult to tear down, though Pope John Paul II in 1980 offered touching gestures of reconciliation celebrating the 450 years of the Augsburg confession and in the course of Pope Francis visit last October 2016 to Sweden, questions of Justification and common communion were raised. There was also the call to focus on the "centripetal force of baptism" in order to counteract the "centrifugal forces which threaten always to separate churches." Secondly, the unity week challenges us to delve deeply into the horrible, painful and sad divisions that followed this period, name them and humbly get over them through a true and genuine process of reconciliation. Today in the phraseology of President John Kennedy uttered at the Capitol Hill on the day of his inauguration on January 20<sup>th</sup> 1961: Ask not what the Churches can do for one another, but what together we can do for the cause of

Jesus Christ and His Gospel. This is a matter for our serious attention in view of reconciliation and evangelization.

The time has come with the new millennium of Redemption and the new century of grace for Churches, to repent of their divisions which we know are clearly contradicting the Will of God: a scandal to the world and a serious impediment to evangelization. The only path of healing this sinful situation for the sake of our Christian witness is reconciliation and to this the love of Christ impels us: it is a mandatory task, it is an imperative and we can neither be indifferent to it nor ignore it. We might be like Thomas the doubting apostle looking for proof to the mystery in the wounds that we seek to touch! Or like the woman at the well, evading questions, running away from clear demands and trying to conceal our stories. All that is hidden and secretive in us, is well known to the Lord, even before we decide to confess them! All of us need to discover the brother that we have rejected in secret making ourselves strangers to him. It is like the family story of Jacob and his sons, the brothers of Joseph who went down to Egypt looking for food and finding a thing more precious: *their lost brother*. It is time for us to shed tears not only of repentance for the sins of division but also tears of joy, for we have at long last discovered the brother that was lost to us. This is ecumenism: a feast of encounter, communion and meeting that engenders joy and gives us solace whilst healing our wounds. The scandal of division in the Church is a double-edged sword: scandal and obstacle to evangelization. What the world is asking of us today is not what we as churches hold near and dear in our histories and traditions, but its eagerness to see the liberating presence of Christ announced.

Reconciliation is fundamental to the mission of Christ. He came to reconcile a sinful world to God: God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. The way of the Incarnation is the key to this reconciliation. He took upon himself the burden of others as the Isaian Prophecy of the Suffering Servant so well envisions. In his life time, he reconciled the Jews and the Samaritans. John the Baptizer saw him as the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. The gentile Syro-phenician woman's faith when pleading for the healing of her possessed daughter, was something marvelous in the hearing of Jesus. Among the 10 lepers who were cleansed was one, a Samaritan, who turned up to say: "Thank you Lord". The compassionate man who showed mercy to the Jew fallen among the robbers on the highway, was a Samaritan! The imposing scene of the encounter of Jesus of Nazareth who came to slake his thirst at Jacob's well and the dialogue of compassion, of patience and tenderness that ensued with the Samaritan woman, has many a tale to tell us and lessons to impart. She was a slow and painful journey to reach the well of the Living Water!

Mark tells us how Jesus took on the towns and villages of Galilee with ease, telling the stories of the Kingdom of God, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. He confronted with ease the frightful daemoniac who came out of the caves of Gerasenes breaking his chains and living in the tombs. All three synoptic Gospels record with poignancy: the silencing of this demon! Simon Peter's bold confession took place in the heart of the gentile country, that of Caesarea-Philippi: "Who do you say that I am: You are the Messiah, the Son of

the Living God!” It was a moment of grace for Peter and the disciples who shared his faith. For Peter, it was special because Jesus tells him: “It is not flesh and blood that has revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, the rock of faith on which I will build my Church”. This is the wonder of the grace of reconciliation of Peter who went on his knees in Galilee once, pleading with the Lord: “Depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful Man!” And the gracious reply of Jesus: “Be not afraid Simon, for from now on you shall catch men! No wonder therefore, St. John tells us in the opening chapter of the graces that relentlessly cascade on us with the coming of Christ: “We have received grace upon grace”. These are fine examples of the abundance of Divine Blessings that come from reconciliation which is God’s initiative disposing us to be molded by him as the clay in the hands of the potter.

Being reconciled is the only antidote to the sin of division. It is also a missionary task because Paul tells us today that we are *ambassadors of Christ entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation*. Paul took the spirit of the Council of Jerusalem, which settled the question of the gentile converts beyond its purely religious context, to embrace further larger contexts like in Christ there is no discrimination of an ethnic nature (Jew and Greek), of a social nature (slave and free man) and further no gender discrimination (between male and female). He took this message to Rome, Corinth, Colossae, Ephesus and Galatia: the major cosmopolitan centers of the New Testament world. The Catholics worldwide just ended a long year of Mercy, the door to Reconciliation that has been declared by Pope Francis last year. This reconciliation demands a shift towards a more just world, a less violent world, with greater respect for human dignity and rights and fostering of solidarity and brotherhood of man, with careful attention to the health and the well-being of the environment. So we see that the paradigm of Reconciliation holds good for any situation of conflict and estrangement. It transcends space and time.

Our dear motherland too is in dire need of national reconciliation: ethnic harmony, care for the poor and the afflicted, good governance and social justice. We need a reconciled and concerned Church of all Christian believers, in order to become the sign, the sacrament and servant-agent of reconciliation amongst our people. Our different church communities, drawn as they are from diverse ethnic identities, in partnership and dialogue with believers of all other religions, will surely hasten the divine blessings of unity and reconciliation to our beloved motherland, struggling still with these difficult and painful issues. The Sri Lankan Christians will thus be at the service of the nation.....channels of that healing grace, salt and leaven of unity .....ambassadors of **Christ: the one and only abiding Reconciler of humanity**. Love of Christ impels us indeed, to this daunting task: it is the Need of the Hour! Amen.

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Homilist, Prayer Service for Christian Unity,

Methodist Church, Cinnamon Gardens.

Sunday, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2017.

5.00 pm.