

St Andrews Walkerville 28.5.17

Acts 1.6-14

Ps 68.1-10, 32-35

1 Peter 5

John 17.1-11

Praying for the parish as the body of Christ.

- Last week around 90 of the clergy of the Diocese met together for the annual clergy conference at Rowlands Flat near Lyndoch in the Barossa.
- It was a great couple of days-Stuart did a really good job helping with the organisation and then acting as the MC to keep us on track.
- On the second day I addressed the group and shared some thoughts about future directions.
- I said that it was very important that as we go forward we pray for growth and growth in four ways.
- Growth in the number of people who are coming to faith in Jesus Christ and joining our parishes.
- Growth in faith among those who are already coming to church so we know God more deeply and are able to share our faith more readily and easily.
- Third, growth in service, so that we might serve the community, be a blessing to the community with no strings attached-just making things better.

- And fourth growth in generosity in terms of the money and other resources we have.
- I encouraged the clergy to be praying for growth along these lines and I offered a draft prayer for growth in these four areas and I invited the clergy to improve my prayer because I am sure it can be. Once the prayer is finalised we will send it out and ask parishes as congregations and individuals to be praying, praying for growth.
- We need to be praying for growth for 2 reasons-first, I am convinced that even though the church is in decline in some areas God hasn't finished his work yet and retired to the Gold Coast.
- There is still much to be done and God is continuing to draw people to faith, and still wanting to bless the community he loves, so we need to be praying that growth will happen and we will be on Gods wave length so we can do our part.
- And the second reason is that growth in the church in those four areas of growth is actually a divine activity. We can't make growth happen. That's Gods work, we can have a part to play but its God who changes hearts and so we pray that God will bring growth through changed hearts.

- You might be wondering what all this has to do with today's theme- 'praying for the parish as the body of Christ'. Well there is a very close link.
- While growth in the church is something God brings about, a parish and the members of a parish have a very important role to play.
- People encounter the good news of Jesus Christ in lots of different ways but very often that encounter happens through a parish or someone who is a member of a parish. And the idea is that a person who is in the process of discovering Jesus will be able to join a church and through that church learn more about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and be formed into a disciple of Jesus. So the ministry of parish communities is really important.
- And for parishes to be really effective they need to be healthy. They need to have a clear idea of what they are on about, they need to have good leadership and another important factor is they must be united. If a new person comes along and finds disunity in a parish they will not stay. The holy spirit may have prompted them to come along but if there is disunity the work of God is frustrated.

In today's gospel reading which is part of a very long prayer Jesus prayed to the father on the night before he was executed he prayed this about his disciples, (verse 11b). 'Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one'.

- Jesus prayed for unity for his disciples because he knew how important it would be. Not as an end in itself but because unity is important for the church to be effective in its work. A divided parish cannot be effective. It cannot be effective because all its energy isn't going into what it is supposed to be doing its energy is used up in internal squabbles, and a divided parish cannot be effective because no one wants to join a divided church where there are unresolved and festering disagreements or factions competing with each other or power brokers trying to get their own way.
- Now I am sure that St Andrews is a united parish. I have not heard anything that would make me think otherwise. But unity is precious. It is fragile-it can be upset pretty quickly, and it is hard to recover.

- The theme for today is praying for the parish as the body of Christ and one of the reasons it is important to pray for the parish is to pray for unity. To pray for continued unity.
- Your parish prayer picks that up when it says- ‘help us to encourage and care for each other in friendship and fellowship and to grow in grace and in love’ which is really great but I want to emphasise how important that is.
- The role of the parish is critically important to the work of God.
- A parish community is generally where committed Christians worship and fellowship. It’s a community to which new people can come and be welcomed and nurtured and it is a community which together can serve and bless the wider community. But it has to be united. Not inward looking but united so that it can minister to those who aren’t members yet. So that it can welcome newcomers. So that it can make new disciples. So that it can be a blessing to the wider community.
- Jesus knew how important unity was among his disciples so he prayed for it. We can do the same. Pray for the parish, that it might be one as Jesus and the Father are one, pray that it might be one so that it can be effective in what it is supposed to do.
- There are of course times when unity does get a bit stretched. We are all sinners. None of us is perfect and from time to time we will be unreasonable or unfair or selfish. And so relationships can be strained and maybe even broken. If that happens prayer is really important. To pray for the situation but also if someone has offended you its really important to pray for them.
- This is not the usual response to offense. Usually umbridge is the usual response but in my experience where there are relationship strains prayer is the answer.
- It is a fact that we cannot stay angry with someone if we pray earnestly for Gods blessing on them. There is something about prayer, about the connection with God that prayer is, that changes me as I pray. It changes my attitude.

- So if someone in the body of Christ irritates you or offends you or hurts you or is unfair towards you-pray for Gods blessing for them. Whatever is the effect on them, the effect on you will be to see them through Gods eyes and the way towards unity will again be open.
- The whole point of unity for the church is effective mission. That's the reason. We don't pursue unity and protect unity as an end in itself. The whole point of striving for unity because we have to strive for it and sometimes that is costly, the whole point is effectiveness in the mission of the church. Disunity is a mission killer.
- I do believe that God wants his church to grow. To grow in numbers of people coming to faith in Jesus, to grow in the depth of our knowledge of God. To grow in no strings attached service to the community. To grow in generosity with all that God has given us to look after. And I will be asking that we pray for that.
- But really, in order for the growth to happen parishes will need to be united. That's why we pray for the parish as the body of Christ because the parish as the body of Christ has much ministry to do.
- Please keep praying the parish prayer. But also pray for each other by name. And pray especially for those who irritate you and those you find it hard to like. That prayer will do them no harm and you and the mission of the parish lots of good.
- The parish is a critical part of the body of Christ. Lets keep praying for the parish and the members of it so this part of the body of Christ can do its work well. Amen.