***One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic***

*All Saints’ Church, Cuddesdon, 22nd January 2018*

*Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and Licensing of Emma Pennington as Area Dean*

‘We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church’. The only problem is that we haven’t got one! The Church is patently not ‘one’, not a single entity either structurally, constitutionally or ecclesiologically. And it is far from being unified, either, in purpose, priority or programme. Sometimes (at best) we may enjoy a degree of coherence, even of harmony, in our immediate and local experience of Church (though not always, unless your PCC is very different from many that I have known!) but beyond the parochial and the familiar, singleness of identity and belonging often looks a bit far-fetched.

Hence – obviously – the need for prayer for Christian unity, and this week which is dedicated by Christians in all their glorious (or inglorious) diversity to that particular cause. We believe in one Church, but not as an actual, lived reality; rather as an aspiration or (perhaps better) as promise and intention of God, needing to be realised, needing to be uncovered, to be prayed for.

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So I wonder what a Week of Prayer for Christian Holiness would look like? Or what effects it might have? Or Christian catholicity, come to that? Or even apostolicity?

For these creedal ‘marks’ of the Church, whose unrealised nature we are this week encouraged to reflect upon (at least in terms of the first), are all of them at best incomplete and aspirational, existent in the mind and intention of God, yet tragically not in real-time Christian experience.

It seems, indeed, that we are rather further back even than we thought. It’s not just Christian unity that is in deficit, but everything else that according to our Creed characterises what we are and what we are supposed to be.

Now, this could be considered a somewhat dispiriting place to have reached, and a dispiriting environment in which to be welcoming and commissioning Emma as our new Area Dean. But I want to suggest that it could in fact be an important place in which to dwell for a few moments as we seek to reflect on our calling and mission and witness in the world, and how we are structured and led so as to be faithful to it. A good place, even, to think about the ministry of the Area Dean.

To start with the candid acknowledgement that the Church of God is not just short of unity, but also lacking in holiness and rather more incoherent than catholic and most certainly introspective rather than apostolic in its focus, may be uncomfortable, but to do so may suggest some important points of contact with the wider world that we inhabit and share in and are called to minister to.

Because this is a world – both from a macro, global perspective, and as experienced at the intimate level of our own communities, homes and households – that is often deeply disunited, factionalised and tribal; distinctly disconnected, fragmented, incoherent and atomised; and relentlessly turned in on itself with inner dynamics of interest and competition dominant, rather than outward facing and altruistic.

So the disunited, unholy, uncatholic, unapostolic Church is no more or less than a reflection of the world in which it is set. Which means that the renewal and reform we pray for the Church – starting this week with our prayer for Christian unity – is no less than our prayer for the world and its salvation.

And it is nothing less than the salvation of the world, of course, that we are called to pray for and witness to and – in Christ – to minister. Our prayer for a more united, holier, better integrated, kinder and less selfish world comes from the heart of a Church that acknowledges precisely the self- same need, that recognises in itself the very same deficiencies and disfigurations.

Truthfully inhabited, this would be the prayer and the ministration not of a morally superior would-be superhero sort of Christian community, but the prayer of a wounded, vulnerable, disfigured Church which is the authentic body of the wounded, vulnerable, disfigured One we worship and look to to be saved. Starting with prayer for our own unity, we are led to sacrificial intercession for our world – God’s world – and thus to the ministry of healing within it.

This, surely. Is the contemplative, compassionate, courageous Church that Bishop Steven is challenging us to be: *reflectively conscious* both of where ae are and where we are not; *humbly appreciative* of and responsive to the needs and frailties of the world in which we are set; and *sacrificially committed* to justice and the transfiguration of all that diminishes and undermines human flourishing.

This is what we pray for as we pray for Christian unity, and for renewal in terms of those other marks of the Church, also, for the sake of the world. And it is for her part in the leadership of this renewal amongst us that we celebrate Emma’s commissioning this evening.

Yes, inter-denominational cooperation leading to structural amalgamation are important ideals and objectives. These are the traditional themes of ecumenism and of this particular week and how it is familiarly observed in parishes and inter-church gatherings or one kind or another. But the challenge, surely, is to think simultaneously more globally and more intimately than this.

More globally in that unity is not simply about Christian organisation, internal economy or reputation: it’s our prayer for the world and – in the Gospel – our gift to the world. And more intimately because *all* renewal (and especially when we are talking about unity) starts with the renewal of relationships – in the home and the workplace, in the Church and the parish and the Churches Together Group, in the deanery and the diocese, and in the interminable structures that people like Area Deans are called to animate. Indeed, in every environment where we are given opportunity.

So the Chapter and the Synod – even such apparently pedestrian associations such as these – as well as congregations and PCCs and more formally ecumenical forums of gathering can become and need to become crucibles of unity, platforms on which our commitment to a renewed world and communities suffused with Good News is played out and made manifest. The leadership we are affording to Emma amongst us this evening is leadership in constant renewal in all this responsibility.

*Contemplative* to serve a rushed and panicky world that forgets how to pray. *Compassionate* to witness to a cutthroat and competitive world that has privatised love. And *courageous* to insist on and bring about change, so that God’s saving grace may be seen and known for what it is.

Renewal in Unity, yes – but it only *starts* here! Amen.