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The Second Sunday after Epiphany

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## PRAYING FOR THE CHURCH

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Epiphany means "manifestation": God's glory manifest in Christ, not just to Israel but to the whole world. The star-led Magi are the first-fruits of the Gentiles, the first "outsiders" to be called by God to know Jesus as the Christ, the "King, and God, and Sacrifice" for the whole world. Thus the season of his Epiphany is a time to acknowledge the catholicity of the Church and the universality of its mission, to "preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15) and "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Because "God wills all men to be saved" (1 Timothy 2:4), "whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21), and therefore the Church embraces "all sorts and conditions of men": "Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26-28). "O hear ye this, all ye people; ponder it with your ears, all ye that dwell in the world; high and low, rich and poor, one with another" (Psalm 49): "kings of the earth, and all peoples; princes, and all judges of the world; young men and maidens, old men and children, praise the Name of the Lord: for his Name only is excellent, and his praise above heaven and earth" (Psalm 149).

This is the catholicity to which the gospel calls all Christians, a unity with God and Man that is given to us in Christ, a unity in truth and charity which is prior to all visible forms of organization. By our profession as Christians, and our participation in the sacraments, we are committed to both hold and seek this catholic unity in the truth and in charity. Accordingly, in the Sacrament of Unity we pray that God would "inspire continually the Universal Church with the spirit of truth, unity, and concord: and grant that all those who do confess thy holy Name may agree in the truth of thy holy Word, and live in unity and godly love". In our daily prayers we ask for grace "hold the faith in unity of spirit, in the bond of peace, and in righteousness of life".

In practical terms, this unity in the truth and charity of Christ must be sought on a number of fronts. First: in a commitment to bearing witness to the Gospel to every kind of human being, of any religion or none, which is the work of evangelism. Second: in a commitment to seek reconciliation with other Christians, those in other denominations and in our own divided house. This reconciliation involves finding ways to acknowledge one another as fellow Christians, uncovering and

recognizing what divided Christians have in common, while at the same time acknowledging and clarifying our differences, and together seeking a fuller unity in the truth as the indispensable basis for institutional unification. This is not achieved by settling for the lowest common denominator or by discounting questions of doctrine. In the deep impairment of Anglican unity we have immense challenges: most recently exacerbated by the election (as yet unconfirmed) of a partnered lesbian as bishop in the diocese of Los Angeles, and the legalistic insistence of its diocesan bishop that electoral process take precedence over doctrinal commitments. An Anglican Covenant has been proposed as a means of restoring unity to the Communion: it is a question whether it will be adopted, or, if adopted, will be adequate to repair the breaches in unity already made. Surely it is a matter that deserves careful study, discussion and prayer. The challenges of our divisions will not be easily overcome, and any kind of organizational unity can only follow upon theological clarification.

Besides these larger matters, catholic unity in truth and charity is also a vocation for individual Christians to live out within the local congregation. "Receive ye one another, as Christ also received you". Acknowledging one another as members of the one body requires the practice of humility, charity, forbearance, and forgiveness. No Christian is entitled to keep scores, and nurse resentments. We will have disagreements, difficulties, and even sometimes justified irritation, with one another. "But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another" (Galatians 5:15). GGD

### **The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar**



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