

Cathedral Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 18 January 2026

1 Corinthians 1, 1-9; John 1. 29-42

'Come and see'

In the summer vacation of 1970, an oddly assorted group of students and 2 chaplains from Bristol University set off on a journey to France, to a small village near Lyon called Chazay d'Azergue, where an old house had an overgrown garden badly in need of attention; the enthusiastic students, from the Anglican chaplaincy and the Roman Catholic chaplaincy, were going to fix the garden.

The house had been the home of a remarkable French priest, Abbe Paul Couturier, who had died in 1953, and it remained a retreat centre for small groups. Paul Couturier had been born in Lyon to a French family with Jewish blood. The family had then moved to Algeria, where the young Paul had grown up surrounded by Muslim culture. He had then returned to France, where he studied science, and was then ordained priest, becoming greatly loved by all those he served. In his 40's he was much involved in working with the thousands of Russian refugees who sought refuge in France, and was deeply impressed by the Russian Orthodox spiritual heritage which they brought with them.

With so many rich spiritual traditions woven together in his life, Paul Couturier became convinced of the need for Christians to be united in appreciating the spirituality which bound them together, and in working together to overcome prejudices and divisions. He believed that praying for the increased holiness of all peoples would inevitably lead to a greater understanding of God in the world. To this end, he re-formed and developed a movement for Christian unity which had been started by 2 Anglican priests in 1908, and this became, in 1934, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity which we celebrate this week.

I was in that group which went to work in Abbe Paul Couturier's garden. I had come as one of the students from the Roman Catholic Chaplaincy, having just a month or so before been received into the Catholic Church. My parents were devout Methodists, and I had been raised with good Methodist theology, and nurtured by the hymns of Charles Wesley – and yet on the occasion when I first attended Mass in a Dominican friary where I was attending a sixth form conference, I had been overwhelmed by the sense that there was something awesome going on, and I wanted to be part of it. It seemed, somehow, to represent a bigger picture of the Church, than I had grown up with; and when I first heard what is known as 'the Roman canon' – part of the Eucharistic prayer offered during Mass, with its recital of saints going back to the earliest days of the Church, it was a spine-tingling moment;

this is how it goes:

In communion with the glorious ever-Virgin Mary,
Mother of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ, †and blessed Joseph, her Spouse,
your blessed Apostles and Martyrs, Peter and Paul, Andrew,
James, John, Thomas, James, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew,
Simon and Jude; Linus, Cletus, Clement, Sixtus, Cornelius, Cyprian,
Laurence, Chrysogonus, John and Paul, Cosmas and Damian and all your Saints;
we ask that through their merits and prayers, in all things
we may be defended by your protecting help.

I could be part of that company? Going back through the centuries, to the origins of Christianity? Yes, I could. So I made my decision – much to the grief of my mother, who took some years to realise that Roman Catholics were actually rather nice people, and not so strange after all. Ecumenical relations have moved on a good deal in the last 50 years, thank God!

So to return to France in 1970 – yes, we laboured together, in Christian unity in that wilderness of a garden (Alan Tichmarsh would have been impressed), and then we went on to stay at Taizé, that wonderful community for all the world, which had also been part of Paul Couturier's vision for unity. In a few years' time, one of the walls of the church there had to be demolished in order to accommodate the vast numbers who came to pray, chant and celebrate the Eucharist each day, and still they come

Twenty five years later, when it seemed that the refreshing winds of the Spirit, which had blown through the Roman Catholic Church with the 2nd Vatican council, had somewhat died down, and a more hard-line, authoritarian stance was taking hold, I felt increasingly uncomfortable calling myself a Roman Catholic, and found my way into the Church of England, my spiritual home – not always an easy place to be, these days, but I feel it's where I belong, and I delight in the breadth and the richness of the Anglican tradition. And not just the Church of England either – in 2009 I found myself in India, on a pilgrimage with a group led by our former Precentor Patrick, exploring meditation in different religious traditions, and in a Zen Buddhist retreat centre high up in the Western Gats, led by a Jesuit priest, had the life-changing experience of learning meditation as I'd never known it before... what richness and diversity await us, when we 'come and see'!

It seems to me that Jesus is continually saying to each one of us, 'Come and see!', as he said to those Galilean fishermen in today's gospel. It happened like this: it was Andrew and his friend – who that friend was remains a mystery, it may even have been John, the author of the fourth gospel, writing himself into the story. They had been disciples of John the Baptist. But when they hear John testifying to Jesus as the Beloved Son, in whom the Father delights - 'Behold the Lamb of God', the one who through his gentleness and vulnerability would rescue people and bring them close to God, the Saviour of the world - they leave John to follow Jesus.

John's witness to Jesus had been at the expense of his own following – but he sees now that the time has come for the new era of salvation to begin. A new community of faith is about to be formed, for which John had prepared the way. It would move beyond the confines of Israel, to whom the OT prophets had proclaimed their message, to the whole world; a bigger picture was now emerging; and Andrew and his friend had glimpsed this new beginning, and were open to its possibilities.

A dialogue then begins: Jesus asks them 'What are you looking for?' - a deep question, which no doubt could have meant many things: 'what are you *really* searching for in your life'

and they reply 'Rabbi (teacher), where are you staying?' 'Come and see' says Jesus. In John's gospel, everyone who wants to know God must be willing to make a pilgrimage of faith, and have their eyes opened to the truth that Jesus has to offer. It is a risk – but they take it; and spend a whole day with Jesus. Wouldn't you love to know of the conversation that took place, as Jesus offered these two men hospitality, in the place where he was staying – wherever that was?

And as a result of that life-changing conversation, Andrew becomes the first missionary for this new faith, as he goes to find his brother Simon, and excitedly tells him 'We have found the Messiah – the anointed one – the one we have been waiting for.' He then brings Simon to Jesus – who immediately gives him a new name, Cephas, Peter, the rock on which the new Christian community will be built. And you could say that the rest is (church) history – of which we are a continuing part.

It is an extraordinary story, from such small beginnings; and the Christians living in Corinth, were an important part of that story, in its early years, a group who had been nurtured by Paul, who writes to them, as we heard, in our first reading this morning. He reminds them that they are part of a bigger picture, 'called to be saints, together with all those who in every place, call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.' They have been, says Paul, 'in every way enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind'. Yet sadly, if we were to read on in this letter from Paul, we should discover that the Corinthians had fallen into disunity, they had become a fragmented group, following different leaders, arguing among themselves about conflicting allegiances – forgetting that they were part of something much greater than their own small community in Corinth – important a place though that was. Perhaps their vision had turned inwards, rather than outwards, so that they became focused on their own identity, forgetting their mission to the wider world? It is a picture of a church community that may sound uncomfortably familiar to us today.

Going back to my earliest years in the Methodist church, I remember a hymn written by John Wesley which began 'O Lord, enlarge our scanty thought'. Scanty – a good word to describe the lack of vision when we focus on ourselves and forget that we

are part of a bigger picture, a great movement stretching back for centuries, consisting of all who have like us been 'called to be saints'. Whenever we say together the Nicene creed – which some of us will be reflecting on over lunch today – we are allying ourselves with that great, invisible community of faith, rooted in the eternity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which has responded to the invitation of Jesus to 'come and see'.

Andrew, our patron saint in this Cathedral, should be our example and inspiration: he could have stayed within the security of his fishing boat, doing what he'd always done – and perhaps if he had done, we might not have been here today! But he took that pilgrimage of faith, and was willing to have his eyes opened to new truths; and then to share what he had discovered with others, beginning with his brother. The dialogue began with the invitation of Jesus – but it continued with him. And it continues whenever we open our lives to others, to share with them our experiences, and are willing to share theirs, and to learn new truths. I think Andrew would have approved of all those local community groups who were welcomed into our Cathedral yesterday. He would approve even more if everyone here today went home and invited someone who perhaps has never visited this place to 'come and see', to share with them what you have experienced on your journey of faith, to continue that dialogue which began for you when you first responded to the invitation to come and see. The enormity of God's salvation is for us to discover, and to share.

And we long for this breadth of vision in the whole Church, as this week we pray each day for unity. To return to Abbe Paul Couturier: he believed in the power of prayer, to draw Christians, and indeed the whole world together, in a greater understanding of God, and he spoke of what he called 'an invisible monastery' of praying people who would draw strength from knowing that they were part of a vast praying community. Perhaps if you feel isolated praying at home, or if prayer is a struggle, you could share in the Daily Prayer of the Church, either by joining us here at 8 am each day, and ythen for Evensong or Evening Prayer. or by joining in the same prayer of the Church online, wherever you are, and thus knowing that you too are part of that bigger picture.

I look back with thankfulness over my pilgrimage of faith over many years, and the unexpected directions in which it has led me; and who knows what is still left to be discovered? And I think of those words from T S Eliot's Four Quartets – in East Coker, not so far from here:

'Old men ought to be explorers
Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion...'

Let that be our prayer today. 'Come and see...'

