

In this week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we have the opportunity to celebrate and give thanks for the different traditions, and customs that each denomination brings to the life of the whole family of Christ's church. For we are as St Paul says, one body, made up of many parts. Each one is different, each one is special, each one has a vital part to play as we seek to love and serve the one God. If we take any one away, the life of the whole church family is diminished in some way. In the passage we heard today, Paul calls us to be united in mind and purpose.

As we think about the different denominations, we see that they do have a different focus.

Within the Anglican tradition, there is a strong emphasis on liturgy and music as part of our worship and a strong sense of the church being there for everyone in a particular community.

The Baptist tradition, puts much more focus on the preaching of God's word, as a means of helping individuals to come to an adult commitment of faith through baptism.

The Methodist Church was founded on a strong sense of membership, or covenant with God and with one another, that grew out of fellowship in very structured Bible study. Each year, this covenant is affirmed and renewed by Methodist congregations in the annual Covenant Service.

The Roman Catholic tradition places the emphasis on the mass as the central act of worship, the sacrament through which we are united with God's love made known in Christ and lived out by the saints in every age.

Each of these traditions helps to enrich our common understanding of what it means to know, to love and to serve God as we share in his mission in the world today.

Ecumenism, is something that is very close to my own heart. It was a great joy and privilege to be part of an ecumenical chaplaincy team at Burrswood Hospital, for 6 years, before coming to Aylesford. Many years ago, when I was a curate in Weymouth, I also served as a relief chaplain in the multi faith Chaplaincy team at the Prison Ship the Weare, which was at that time in Portland Harbour.

I think the week of Prayer for Christian Unity is about celebrating our differences, while giving thanks for all that unites us in Christ.

Ecumenism, is not about uniformity, but about unity in diversity.

For me, and for many others, the Taize Community in France, stands as something of a beacon for the way in which people from all different background and cultures can come together and learn something of the love of Christ.

It is great that later today we will be hosting a Taize style Service here in Church, bringing to an end our local week of prayer for Christian Unity.

For those of you who do not know, the roots of the Taize Community go back to 1940 when, at the age of twenty-five, Brother Roger its founder, left Switzerland, the country where he was born, to go and live in France, where his mother came from.

For years he had been an invalid, suffering from tuberculosis. During that long illness, Brother Roger had sensed God calling him to create a community where simplicity and kind-heartedness would be lived out as Gospel realities.

When the Second World War started, Brother Roger had the conviction that he should begin at once to offer assistance to people in difficult straits, just as his grandmother had done during the First World War.

The small village of Taizé, where he settled, was close to the demarcation line that divided France in half, and so was well situated to be a place of welcome for refugees fleeing the war. Friends from Lyon were happy to give the address of Taizé to people seeking refuge.

Thanks to a modest loan, Brother Roger was able to buy a house in Taizé that had been uninhabited for years, with the outlying buildings. He asked one of his sisters, Genevieve, to come and help him offer hospitality. Among the refugees they sheltered were Jews. Material resources were limited. There was no running water, so for drinking water they had to go to the village well. Food was simple, in particular soups made from corn flour bought cheaply at the nearby mill.

In 1945, a young man from the region created an association to take charge of young boys orphaned by the war. When he suggested to the brothers that they welcome some of them in Taizé, Brother Roger asked his sister Genevieve to come back and take care of them. She became their mother.

On Sundays, the brothers also welcomed German prisoners-of-war interned in a nearby camp.

Gradually other young men arrived and joined the original group, and on Easter Day 1949, the first brothers committed themselves for their whole life to celibacy, to material and spiritual sharing and to a great simplicity of life.

And so, today, the Taizé Community is made up of over a hundred brothers, Catholics and from various Protestant backgrounds, coming from more than twenty-five nations. By its very existence, the community is thus a tangible sign of reconciliation between divided Christians and separated peoples.

The brothers earn their living by their work, which includes the making of pottery, jewellery, the writing of books, poetry and music. They do not accept donations. In the same way, if a brother inherits something from his family, it is given by the community for the very poor.

As early as the 1950s, brothers from Taizé went to live in disadvantaged places to be with people who were suffering from poverty or divisions. Today, small groups of brothers are present in Asia, Africa and South America. As far as possible they share the living conditions of those who surround them, striving to be a presence of love among the very poor, street children, prisoners, the dying, and those who are wounded in their depths by broken relationships, by being abandoned.

From 1962 on, brothers and young people sent by Taizé came and went continually to the countries of Eastern Europe, always very discreetly, to be close to those who were trapped within their borders. Now that walls have fallen and travel is easier between East and West, contacts with Orthodox Christians, always important, have increased significantly.

Church leaders around the world have recognised the significance of the Gospel message brought lived out by the Taizé Community. The community has welcomed Pope John Paul II, three Archbishops of Canterbury, Orthodox metropolitans, the fourteen Lutheran bishops of Sweden, and countless pastors from all over the world.

For many years, now, thousands of young people from around the world have made a pilgrimage to Taizé.

Some weeks in the summer months, more than 5000 young people from 75 different countries gather on the hill around Taizé – bringing their tents and camping equipment or staying in one of the purpose-built dormitories.

I was fortunate to go to visit Taizé, and share for three days in the life of the community. There are two things in particular which will stick in my mind.

The first was an insight into Brother Roger's vision of the way in which the love of God revealed by Christ can break down all human barriers. It was very moving on the Friday evening, to kneel around a large cross laid on the ground. In the peace and silence of the chapel, we each placed our forehead on the wood of the cross. Around that cross were people from the UK, from France, Germany, Russia, Chile and Italy. This was indeed a tangible expression of the way in which the Cross of Christ can bring us together from every social, cultural and national background.

The second memory I have is of meeting Brother Roger. One evening during our stay, all the guests were invited into the private residence of the brothers. Brother Roger, who then was in his 80's, responded to a question and answer session about his life and work. At the end of the meeting, Brother Roger personally shook hands with all 200 guests. Dressed in his simple white robe – Brother Roger simply radiated love and peace.

Brother Roger and the Taizé Community have indeed touched the lives of thousands, and will continue to do so.

Brother Roger, strove to be Christ-like – living out the gospel imperatives of peace, reconciliation, welcome, hospitality and love.

As we give thanks to God today, that he calls us into fellowship within the life of his church, we offer ourselves to share in this task, so that the church today, made up of many different parts in one body, may be a sign and a model of the life that God longs for us all. In the words of Brother Roger:

“When the Church listens, heals, reconciles, then she becomes what she is in her most radiant aspect: a crystal-clear reflection of God’s love.”

Amen.