

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

I think English must be a very difficult language to learn.

Often words have more than one meaning.

For example, with the Open Championship reaching an exciting climax, take the word 'golf club'. How can it be possible to join a golf club and also use a golf club to hit a small white ball?

The word Church has quite a few different meanings.

It can refer to a building we see

A service we attend, 'I am going to Church'

Or it's New Testament meaning 'the Body of Christ' or 'God's called out, to be together people.'

Over the past few days many have appreciated the wonderful choral harmony brought to us by the Southern Cathedrals Festival.

A few years ago a children's magazine put on a competition.

Twenty children were awarded the first prize, which was the invitation to sing two songs in a recording studio that would then be produced into a single.

I was commissioned to write the two songs and to produce and oversee the recording.

I am a firm believer that not only has Britain got talent but also our Christian children have talent, but just because they win a competition does not necessarily mean that their talent is singing.

The recording day came. The lucky winners were in the studio, their very proud parents gazing at them through a sound-proof glass window.

After one take I realised that these children were never going to manage to sing in unison let alone harmony and there was definitely at least one little growler hidden away among them.

Only solution. Singers by the microphone.

Non-singers nowhere near the microphone.

A thumbs up to the parents through the looking glass to say their kid is brilliant.... then...hope for the best!

The recording did not exactly have the vocal quality of our Southern Cathedrals choirs... but the single did sell extremely well!

Far more important than vocal harmony though is Church harmony and unity.

Jesus prayed in John 17 that believers may be as one as He and God are one.

Now does that mean that Jesus wanted all his followers to think the same, interpret the Bible the same and even look the same so we all end up like those little Homepride flour graders.
I think not.

I often wonder why Jesus, when choosing His 12 disciples, did not choose nice easy going, easy to get on with people.

Why on earth did He choose....

The 'sons of thunder', James and John, two fiery impetuous and non-compassionate brothers.

Or Bartholomew, whose first words about Jesus were a sarcastic, 'Can any good thing come from Nazareth?'

Or Matthew the tax collector, who was banned from the synagogues and possibly worked for the hated Romans.

How about Simon the Zealot a fanatical nationalist who's party would happily assassinate any Jew associated with Rome

And of course Judas Iscariot, the only one of the twelve who was not a Galilean and would never be likely to become best chums with any of the other eleven.

Perhaps Jesus thought, if he could get this motley crew to love each other, maybe there would be hope for the Church in years to come.

Paul felt very strongly about the importance of Christian unity.

To the Christians in Rome he writes 'Though you are many you are one body', and he pleads with them to be of one mind.

He tells the Christians in Corinth to stop their quarrelling and be of one mind. Because they have partaken in one bread they must be one body and live in peace with each other.

To the Christians in Ephesus he writes that Christians must maintain the unity of the Spirit remembering there is one Lord one faith and one baptism and one God and Father of all.

And he tells the Christians in Philippi that if they want to make his happiness complete they must stand fast in one spirit, striving together with one mind, for the faith of the Gospel. They must love one another.

I wonder, if Paul was still writing letters today, what would he say to the Church in Chichester?

The New Testament teaches that Christian unity is no optional extra. No-one can truly live the Christian life unless he is actively trying to show love to those around them.

In our reading today, Peter reminds us of the importance of unity. He pleads for Christians to have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart and a humble mind.

Although in the Early Church there were factions, some of Paul, some of Apollos, etc. They did not seem to have the very disparate denominations that we have today.

I believe a book was once published title, *'Forgive Us Our Denominations'* but denominations in themselves are not a bad thing.

I think that it is wonderful that believers have such a variety of choice of how and where to worship.

We are surrounded by church services to suit every taste.

There is a place for those who appreciate the sacramental and traditional and a place for those who enjoy the lively and informal.

None is better or worse than the other and as long as God is being truly worshipped, I believe that He enjoys them all.

But sadly many Christians don't.

It is almost second nature to criticise or mock those who do things another way.

Along with the mocking comes the feeling of being superior, more spiritual and even being closer to God than other churches in the area.

Many years ago when I arrived to pastor a Pentecostal Church in Lancashire I was informed that the local Baptist Church had a good minister but they did not have the Holy Spirit.

But Christian unity has to be a lot deeper than everyone just holding hands in a big circle and singing, *'Bind Us Together Lord'* like some of us did 30 years ago.

My travelling Missioner ministry takes me to all denominations not just Anglican Churches. In the past few months I have had the privilege to minister to the Baptists, Methodists and Free Churches and although I miss being here, I love taking a bit of Chichester Cathedral to them.

Now although we all have our particular preference of church, no denomination is perfect and we can all learn from each other.

Let me finish where I began.

A church leader once told me that his church would be perfect if it was not for the people - but it is people that Jesus chose to make up his Church, not stones nor services.

Sadly often instead of portraying the beautiful Body of Christ on earth, we portray the opposite.

I wonder how many seekers are put off from following Jesus just by observing the arguments and dissention between different Churches.

Of course you and I are not in the position to sort out the worldwide Church unity problem but maybe we can do a little bit to bring a bit more unity to our area.

How?

Quite simply by honouring and respecting those Christians around us who may believe different things and worship in different ways.

We know we must try to love the un-churched, but do we realise that we must also love the church and that can sometimes be even more of a challenge.

All people should know we are Christians not by being church but by being loving.

My friend Gordon Bailey the poet writes

'Why are some churches derided,
And others decidedly odd?
Well, I've thought it through and decided
To pin the blame squarely on God.
He could have built churches of stone, slate, and pews
With chancel, and turret, and steeple;
Yet, with so much to choose, and so much to lose,
He went and made churches of people'.