Two pastors met on the street of their town – it might have been Coventry, and after exchanging greetings and pleasantries for a few minutes, it was time to move on – pastors are busy people, as we all know. ‘Ah well, brother,’ said one, ‘we must be on our way to do the Lord’s work. You in your way, and I in His.’

The week of prayer for Christian Unity is a challenge to the churches at the start of each year to look to their relationships with one another. It seems, on the face of it, obvious that Christians should get along, and, indeed, all be part of the same body, the same movement. At Pentecost, the Spirit was poured out on all believers, and it was clear that the one Spirit was both guiding and equipping and uniting everyone in the same work. In the early days of the Twentieth Century Pentecostal movement, in the chapel in Azusa Street in Los Angeles, the unity which was felt was seen by William Seymour as the principal evidence that this was indeed a genuine move of the Holy Spirit.

So why is there division in the Church of Christ? And how should we respond? I would like to offer one or two reflections, and then some guiding principles from the gospel reading. Firstly, to recognize the abiding reality of difference, and even division. That’s inevitable – it’s not always clear what the Spirit is saying, and even when it is, because we are different people, with different histories, different abilities and characteristics, we will respond in different ways. Even in the pages of the New Testament, we see division in those who are seeking to serve and follow Christ. Between Paul and Barnabas, Paul and Mark, Paul and the Church in Corinth, Paul and Peter … Paul and most people, really. Which is interesting in itself, because we would probably want to affirm that Paul was right about many, even most, or perhaps all things – yet there was this sense of division around him, to judge by the texts. So, the first thing to note is that if there was division even in the years immediately following Jesus’ ministry, it’s not surprising that we still have it today.

The second is to understand that difference and division can be important, even healthy, when it arises in the context of refreshing, reviving and reforming – but that it needs handling in the right way. As Christians in a particular place get used to believing, worshipping and living in a particular way as their response to Jesus they can – truth to tell – become somewhat set in their ways. This is how denominations develop, and they are not in themselves bad things. (Take the cathedral as an example …) Someone may then come along and say, ‘you need to breathe some life into that … let’s do it in a different way’. Reformation, it could be said, is needed. Hostility can arise – sometimes violent … and in the case of the Reformation, Christians ended up killing each other, apparently for theological reasons. The truth is, that constant reformation is needed – but managing the process and the differences can be challenging. We’re human, after all. (And all too often valid theological differences become identified with tribal, ethnic, or simple social divisions and so ‘natural human’ fear and hostility is given theological justification.). So divisions can develop between denominations, and indeed within denominations (Reform, Forward in Faith, Anglican Mainstream.) And that can look damaging to the wider world. How should we respond?

The Chapel of Unity is an example of the response to the damaging reality of these divisions. As we know well, the plans for a Chapel of Unity, under the authority of a Joint Council, were laid as part of the response to the destruction of the old St. Michael’s Cathedral. Agreed in 1944, the large West Crypt (now about to be freshly renovated) was consecrated in 1945 as the new Chapel of Unity. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity was anticipated in 1908 within the Roman Catholic tradition, and ecumenical texts have been promoted since 1968. Part of the prayers and hopes of the week has traditionally been for intuitional, structural unity – but in 2015, the world has changed. The modernist hope of the mid-late C20th, which embraced the hope of mega world-wide
I would love to speak here about our own Coventry History, and the three priorities of the Community of the Cross of Nails: Healing the Wounds of History; Learning to live with Difference and to Celebrate Diversity; Building a Culture of Peace.

Let’s look for a moment at today’s gospel reading.

John 4.1-3 – Jesus avoids the escalation of violence by leaving Jerusalem & Judea for the north.

1. Don’t write off another tradition. The Samaritan woman represents everything that a Jewish Rabbi would despise and avoid – but as she finds herself, against all expectation, accepted and loved she becomes one of the primary witnesses in the New Testament to the reality of Christ as Saviour. (“Come and meet a man who told me everything I’ve ever done ….”) How easy it is to write off others – and even to protect ourselves from them – yet the Spirit is not so constrained.

2. Remember that it’s all about Jesus. Jesus asks for physical water – but ends up offering the water of life, real refreshment, which is the gift of the Spirit to believers. The disciples go into the village to fetch food – but when they return, Jesus says he has real food, that really satisfies – and it’s found in obedience to the will of God, in building his Kingdom. Here is the food and drink of the Kingdom – in obedience and worship. We will find our own ways of discovering refreshment and satisfaction in our own denominational traditions, and we can offer those to Jesus, but in the end we also have to come back to him empty handed to receive. And be ready to be surprised – as both the woman, and the disciples were – how can you give me a drink, the well is deep and you don’t have a bucket … where have you got food from? Be wary of assuming that we have just what Jesus needs – it’s not that we don’t have anything to give to him, but whatever we have to offer him, he has more to give to us. Humility before Jesus – and one another is key.

3. This story has vulnerability at its heart. Jesus makes himself vulnerable with the woman, and then she with him, and with the villagers. Vulnerability leads, through honesty, to truth - truth about the woman, then, most importantly, truth about Jesus, as Saviour. Without the truth of our lives and the life of our churches revealed in mutual vulnerability, we will never reveal the truth of Jesus. It’s not always easy – we can seek to be defensive, and protective – but the truth is that we all struggle – challenges of resources, human and financial, challenges of faith, challenges of theology in a changing world. (My experience as Chair of CTU).

We come together around the wells of salvation – wells in the plural (Isaiah 12.3) – lets introduce each other to one another’s wells, enjoy sharing them, not protecting them nor seeking to poison the others, but enjoying the diversity and the relationships that reveal the beauty of God in our differences. And lets recognize that chapels like this, and weeks of prayer like this, must be witnesses to a greater reality of diverse and good relationships but not seek to replace them with an institutional order which could itself quench the freedom of the Spirit. God is greater than anything and everything we can possibly imagine – that’s the message of the gospel. Our task is to offer him what we have, be ready to receive what he gives, and support one another as we seek to be obedient to him in the world.