

# **WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY**

Our prayer for Christian unity is deeply rooted in the Bible. We pray for unity because Jesus prayed that His disciples would be one, that the world might believe (John 17:20-21). St Paul also urged the churches to which he wrote to recognise their unity in Christ, even though there was much diversity within them (1 Corinthians 12-27).

For the churches in Malta, the Bible has special relevance for the shared life of the churches there, for the Gospel first came to Malta in the events that are told in the Acts of the Apostles, where St Paul and those with him encountered unusual kindness from the inhabitants. Many people in Britain and Ireland will have visited Malta on holiday and seen the place where these events are believed to have taken place. This is a reminder that Christianity is not merely a spirituality, but a faith rooted in events in human history: the redemption of humanity and the whole of creation. The unity for which we pray therefore serves to make Christ known in the world.

The story of St Paul's being shipwrecked on Malta in Acts 27 and 28 leads us, during this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, to reflect upon many aspects of our own lives and the lives of our churches. As we approach one another, seeking unity, we recognize that we sometimes carry baggage from history, tradition and cultural expectation, which can weigh us down and threaten to overwhelm us. There is the danger that, in the face of that experience, we might lose sight of the hope which first called us and so give up reaching for the light which Christ offers us.

St Paul challenged his fellow travellers, sailors, soldiers and prisoners to keep up their courage. In the face of apparent desperation and hopelessness, we are challenged to put our trust in God and allow ourselves to be held and carried through the waters. There will be times when we are broken, as individuals and as churches, and looking back we shall see not just the one set of footprints in the sand, but hundreds, as we are surrounded and supported by those who love us. There will be times when, standing in the storms of our own making, we are challenged to demonstrate unusual kindness in the face of worldly indifference.

To demonstrate unusual kindness is to see the sister and brother in the monster's shame and know that they too are children of God. To demonstrate unusual kindness is to give without counting the cost, and to allow ourselves to be given unto without questioning worth. As we reflect upon, and pray for, Christian unity, we acknowledge the injury that we have caused, the pain that we carry, the baggage that we must jettison. We pray for Christian unity as the place from which we can move onward in faith and in hope for the redemption of the world and the restoration of creation.

For this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we accompany the churches of Malta, praying with and alongside them, praying also for them in their Christian journey as they seek the unity for which Christ prayed. And we rejoice with them that Malta traces its Christian origins back to the time of the Apostles. And in so doing, we enter into the drama of St Paul, those that travelled with him, and the inhabitants whom they met, to discover our shared unity, and in so doing recognise the importance of unusual acts of kindness that bear witness to the Gospel of peace and reconciliation.