**Sermon Sunday 22nd June 2025.**

This Sunday as we have heard, is the 48th anniversary of the Uniting Church in Australia.

For those of us who had grown up in one of the Uniting churches, we may not have really been aware that efforts had been underway for 75 years since 1902 to unite the three denominations, Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational. Indeed, it may not be that surprising when you think that both the Methodist and Presbyterian churches had not long before then united various branches of those churches.

According to our church website when this church was built in 1866, it was the first Presbyterian church built after the union of some different Presbyterian churches in NSW, in 1865. The church was opened on the 31st May 1866 by Rev John Dunmore Lang who preached at a midday service on a passage from Corinthians and then spoke at an evening meeting on his thoughts about the current world situation and his belief that the second coming of Christ was likely to occur in that year or the next , as was the end of the Papacy.

When today we read, and hear Scripture passages like Paul’s letter to the Galatians, we realise that division and reunion, reform and renewal have been constant themes throughout the history of the church and this is because although unity is difficult, if we all are children of God in union with Jesus Christ, it is definitely worth striving for unity and for greater love for our fellow Christians.

When I first read the passage, we heard this morning,

I thought that this is a wonderful thought – but as it is just a small passage – what is the wider message? And so, I read through the whole of Galatians – (which is a fairly short letter) a few times and then realised that there are some great themes in this letter.

Galatia was a Roman province in central Turkey. Paul & Barnabas had visited the towns of Lystra, Derbe and Iconium in around 45 or 46AD. They had established Christian congregations there. A few years later, Paul became aware that the congregations had become infiltrated by conservative Jewish Christians who insisted that gentiles needed to convert fully to Judaism, including circumcision for the men, before becoming acceptable as Christians. This astonished and exasperated Paul.

He thought that he had clearly explained to them that Gentiles were justified by their faith in Christ. Indeed, we read in v.16 chapter 2 that he repeats that no man is ever justified by doing what the law demands, but only through faith in Jesus Christ.

In the passage we heard before, Paul states that formerly the law was a kind of tutor or guardian or even a zealous parole officer keeping us on the straight and narrow.

For Paul, justification is a gift of God, not a human accomplishment. It does not mean that we have to live up to standards of appearance or worth or achievement in education or sport or religion or whatever. And so logically he moved on to the great statement that we are all equal before God. Divisions such as male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or freeman – black or white, citizen or migrant, – although real – are not important - as we are all one person in Christ. We know that this is possible through the death of Jesus and the Grace of God. Through our baptism, we have had a makeover with new clothes. What’s more we are now all on equal footing. We have handed in our prison clothing or our old, school uniforms and now our new Christ like clothing covers any previous distinction.

In modern Australia now, we expect people to treat others with respect – in government offices, in schools, in hospitals. Even more so in our church, we expect that people will be treated with respect.

It is a fact of course that over 48 years there have been some hard times and indeed fracturing but it is also a fact of some joy that our Uniting Church is now more truly a multicultural church, with a partnership with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and our support of Pacific Islands congregations and also Korean congregations.

At present both our NSW Moderator Rev. Mata Havea Hilau and the national President of the UCA, Rev Charissa Suli are women of Tongan Australian heritage.

Last week we heard Michael read a statement form Rev Suli , lamenting the situation in Palestine.

The church’s website notes that

Under the guidance of Rev Suli, the Uniting Church in Australia continues to move forward with a renewed commitment to inclusivity, compassion, and unwavering faith, weaving together the diverse threads of its community into a unified and loving tapestry that reflects the deep love of God found in Christ.

This statement reflects some of the conclusion of Paul’s letter to the Galatians where in chapter 5

he exhorts the Galatians and us not to turn our freedom into licence for selfishness, envy, quarrels and so forth

* but rather to follow the leading of the Spirit and let God’s grace produce freedom, joy, peace and love. These and other qualities are the harvest of the Spirit.

In conclusion then , I find three great thoughts in Paul’s letter to the Galatians

1. We are acceptable to God because of his gracious love for us shown by his son Jesus , in his love for us to the point of sacrifice
2. Because we believe and are baptised into faith, we are all equal in God’s sight
3. We recognise that unity is difficult but worth striving for as we act with respect and love for others.