

# Incognito? I don't think so!

Acts 1:6-14

John 17:1-11

**Purpose:** To highlight the value of Christian unity as a witness that challenges a culture of disharmony and conflict.

If you want to travel inconspicuously throughout life, please don't follow the example of Secret Squirrel. If you want to blend into the crowd and merge with the multitudes, please don't follow the example of the sleuth with the tooth, Secret Squirrel.

If you aim for a private faith, something that is just between you and God, Secret Squirrel is not the role model for you. If you want your relationship with God to be hidden and for your life of prayer and worship to be like a secret rendezvous between illicit lovers you'll need better examples than Secret Squirrel.

Secret Squirrel may have been the master of disguise but this Hanna-Barbera cartoon character from the 1960s who still gets a rerun even today was never one to blend in with the crowd. With his sidekick, Morocco Mole, his felt hat and trench coat were a dead give-away. Secret Squirrel was about as incognito as James Bond, the movie character on which he was satirically based.

So whatever you do, if you want your Christian life to pass unnoticed, if you want to blend into the background and fade into the familiar patterns of the world and the community, never, never, never follow the example of Morocco Mole and Secret Squirrel.

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Not that I imagine fading into the background is what most Christian people would want to do. After all, we are the receivers of the tradition that Jesus begins in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles today. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you," Jesus tells the apostles before disappearing into the clouds, "and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

When you are a fellow traveller with Jesus, wandering through this world in the power of the Holy Spirit, standing out from crowd as witnesses is one of those

things that you are called to do. It's actually quite hard to travel incognito as a follower of Jesus and still be a witness. Blending into the background and merging with the multitudes is not what we Christians are called to be and do.

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Of course, if our vocation as witnesses calls us to stand out from the crowd, then we want to stand out from the crowd for all the right reasons. So, for example, when senior church officials are criticised by a special commission of enquiry investigating the cover-up of child sexual abuse and the investigating commissioner describes their actions as "inexcusable", that's standing out from the crowd, but for all the wrong reasons.

Better to stand out from the crowd as a laughing stock like a cartoon character than to stand out from the crowd for our infamy. Better still to stand out from the crowd for a positive Christian witness.

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Today is the first day of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity invites over the next week we are invited to reflect on the unity to which God calls us and for which Jesus prays in our gospel reading for today.

It's rather a long prayer and our gospel passage is just a small part of it. In the prayer Jesus rehearses his missionary purpose – the things that he came into the world to achieve. As the moment of crucifixion approaches he asks to be glorified and we who read the prayer with the advantage of hindsight know that he has the Easter events firmly in his view. It is an extraordinary prayer in which we hear the depth of intimacy that exists between himself and the Father and the extraordinary interconnectedness of the divine purpose which he shares with the Father. And then the words that I hope we will take to heart today. Praying for us, praying for his disciples, praying for those folk who I like to call the fellow travellers of Jesus, praying for the Church Jesus says: "May they be one as we are one." May that deeply interconnected sharing in the divine purpose, that same extraordinary intimacy of relationship dwell within the Church!

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So here is the question for us who are called to be witnesses. When it comes to this unity for which Christ prayed and which Christ intends, do we stand out from the crowd? Does our unity in Christ mark us out? As the song suggests, Will they really know that we are Christians by our love?

Or does our disunity mark us out as a laughing stock like Secret Squirrel in his felt hat, trench coat and gee whizz gadgetry – a comic caricature of what in Christ we are called to become?

Or worse: Is our disunity an infamy that betrays the very One who prayed that we might be one? Certainly when one contemplates the Troubles of Northern Ireland undergirded by the religious bigotry that pitted Catholic against Protestant and Protestant against Catholic, one would need to conclude that we do not have to travel too far back in human history to find evidence of the latter.

And these questions are not just the big questions about how Anglicans get on with Baptists or Pentecostal Christian get on with Eastern Orthodox Christians. They are also the questions of how individual Christian relate to each other. It's just as much about how I get on with you and you get on with me and how we all get on with each other.

One of the catch cries which we Christians like to lay claim to sometimes is the one that speaks of telling the truth in love. Seems to me the problem we often have with that catch cry is not the telling the truth bit. It's all too easy to tell the truth when your Christian brother or sister is doing something you don't like. It the "in love" bit of that catch cry that is the problem.

Learning to live in harmony with the person who doesn't do things the way we like to do it, that's the bit we find tricky! Valuing our Christian brother or sister whose preferences in music for worship is different to our preferences, that's what we find hard. Exploring the wisdom of the folk we don't normally see eye to eye with, that's what complicates our lives in Christian community.

It's not telling the truth we find difficult. It's creating the loving environment that allows us to speak with integrity and authenticity. It's creating the space for loving relationship before we get to the truth that mostly we find difficult.

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Yet, unity is fundamental to Christian witness. “I have made your name known,” Jesus prays in his prayers. “This is eternal life, that they may know you.” So witness is already a theme in today’s gospel, but it becomes even more explicit in the verses that follow. “May they become completely one so that the world may believe that you sent me!” (John 17:23)

We are a missionary people. Our unity is fundamental to our missionary purpose. We are not sent into the world incognito to blend into the background or fade into the fashions of the culture in which we live. God calls us to stand out from the crowd; not as laughing stocks, nor for our infamy, but for the quality of the community which with our permission the Spirit of God creates among us.

When it comes to disunity and our broken Christian witness, it is really easy to blame the one who doesn’t see eye to eye with us. But, when you point the finger of blame, as my Mum used to say, all the other fingers are pointing back at you. And if we want to see the fulfilment of Jesus’ prayer is that the best place to start? Not with playing the blame game, but looking towards our own individual opportunities to bring peace and to create a community of love.

Let us pray a prayer for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, a prayer for a people that wants to be a missionary people, a prayer in the Spirit of Jesus:

God of wholeness  
We recognize,  
with sorrow, our divisions  
with each other and with you.

As we seek to recover our unity in Christ  
we recognize the diversity of gifts, talents, understandings and expressions  
of faith  
that abound in the life of your people.

May we see this diversity  
as an encouragement and inspiration  
as together we witness and minister to the needs of your world.

May your Spirit continually guide and lead us  
as we grow in grace with each other  
and with you through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen