Collect, Readings and Reflection for 18 January 2026, Sunday beginning the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Collect *(the Church's prayer for today)*:

Lord Jesus Christ,
who said to your apostles,
'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you':
look not on our sins but on the faith of your Church
and grant it the peace and unity of your kingdom;
where you are alive and reign with the Father
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Readings: Isaiah 58:6-11; Ephesians 4:1-13; John 12:31-36

Today's reflection is by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Cain.

One Body, One Spirit

There is a tradition — ancient, resilient, and profoundly moving — that the gospel first reached the region we now call Armenia through the Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew. Their footsteps, their preaching, their courage in the face of empire planted seeds that would take root in a land whose Christian identity has endured through centuries of upheaval.

One of the most remarkable figures in that story is Gregory the Illuminator.

Gregory is said to have been the son of a Parthian nobleman, Anak, who assassinated Khosrov II, the king of Armenia. The young Gregory was saved from the extermination of Anak's family and was raised as a Christian in Caesarea of Cappadocia, then part of the Roman Empire. Gregory returned to Armenia as an adult and entered the service of King Tiridates III, who had Gregory tortured after he refused to make a sacrifice to a pagan goddess. After discovering Gregory's true identity, Tiridates had him thrown into a deep pit for 14 years. He was miraculously saved from death and released when Tiridates' sister Khosrovidukht saw a vision.

After years of imprisonment for his faith, Gregory emerged not embittered but ablaze with conviction. He healed the king who had been driven mad by his sinful life, and, under Gregory's influence, Armenia became the first nation to adopt Christianity as the religion of the state in the early fourth century. That decision shaped not only the spiritual life of a people but their cultural memory, their moral imagination, and their understanding of themselves in relation to the world.

And yet — and this is important — Armenian Christianity has never been a fragile ornament of history. It has survived invasions, persecutions, and, in the last century, eighty years under the Soviet regime. It has survived because it is not merely a national

badge but a living faith, carried in the hearts of a global diaspora many times larger than the population of Armenia itself.

So today, as we gather for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we do so with the Armenian Church as our guide and companion. Their witness — of faith under pressure, of unity across borders, of hope in the face of injustice — speaks directly into our theme: One Body, One Spirit.

But it also invites us to reflect on something delicate and complex: the idea of a Christian country.

The Benefits — and the Dangers — of a "Christian Nation"

There are benefits, of course. A shared Christian identity can bind a people together across continents and generations. It can offer a moral and ethical framework in which the dignity and value of every person is foundational. It can shape a society where even the king is accountable before the law, and where care for the weak and vulnerable is not an optional virtue but a sacred duty.

These are gifts — and Armenia has embodied them with remarkable courage.
But there are dangers too. Dangers that every nation, including our own, must face honestly. Because when Christianity becomes entangled with nationalism, the gospel is distorted. When we begin to imagine that our nation — any nation — enjoys a special divine favour, we risk turning faith into ideology and neighbours into threats. When the cross is wrapped in the flag, unity fractures and division grows.

And so the Scriptures today call us back — back to the heart of our vocation as followers of Christ.

Isaiah speaks with prophetic clarity: "If you do away with the yoke of oppression… then your light will rise in the darkness."

The prophet reminds us that unity is not sentimental. It is not achieved by ignoring injustice or smoothing over conflict. Unity begins with the dismantling of oppression — with loosening the chains that bind others, with refusing to benefit from systems that crush the vulnerable. Isaiah's vision is not of a nation exalted, but of a people humbled and transformed.

Paul, writing to the Ephesians reminds us that unity must be kept, but never assumed. In his letter he urges the Church:

"Bear with one another in love… keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."
Unity is not something we create. It is something God gives — and something we must guard.

And Paul is realistic. He knows that unity requires patience, humility, gentleness, and the willingness to bear with one another. It requires the courage to listen across difference, to repent when we have caused harm, and to seek peace not as the absence of conflict but as the presence of justice.

And then in John's gospel account we hear Jesus say:

"Now is the time for judgment on this world… and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

The judgment of the world — the judgment of empire — is the cross.
Rome's violence is exposed.
Its power is unmasked.
Its claims to ultimate authority are overturned.
And in that moment, Christ declares that he will draw all people to himself.

Not one nation.
Not one ethnicity.
Not one political tribe.
All people.

The cross is the end of exclusion.
The cross is the collapse of every wall we build.
The cross is the place where nationalism dies and the kingdom of God begins.

Stephen Mattson, the American author and social justice advocate puts it starkly:

"Sometimes being a good Christian meant being a bad Roman. So, before you accuse people of being unpatriotic, ask yourself which empire they're actually serving."

A few weeks ago, I had a conversation with our local MP, Anna Dixon. She has recently taken on the role of Chair of Christians on the Left, and she spoke about the need to counter the appropriation of Christianity by the far right — a trend we are seeing not only in Britain but across Europe and beyond.

She is right to be concerned.
Nationalism is seductive.
It offers belonging without compassion, identity without responsibility, pride without humility.

And yet — and this is crucial — the gospel of Jesus Christ is political but not party political.
It speaks to how we live together, how we treat the stranger, how we steward power, how we pursue justice.

But it cannot be captured by any party, any ideology, or any national myth.
Christian unity, then, is not about uniformity.

It is not about agreeing on every policy or every interpretation.

It is about recognising that our allegiance is first and foremost to Christ — the One who draws all people to himself.

This week, we are invited to pray for Armenia and Artsakh — for peace, for justice, for the protection of human rights, for the restoration of dignity to those displaced and harmed.

But we are also invited to learn from the Armenian Church's witness:
their commitment to peace,
their global sense of community,
their refusal to let suffering silence their hope,
their insistence that Christian unity is not a luxury but a necessity in a fractured world.

Their message to us is simple and profound:
"Christian Unity must be lived as a communion of faith, hope and love — a witness to the world that the gospel is stronger than the divisions of history."

That is our calling too.

To be people whose unity is not built on nationality but on Christ.
To be people whose light rises because we have dismantled the yoke of oppression.
To be people who bear with one another in love, guarding the unity of the Spirit.
To be people who stand at the foot of the cross and hear Jesus say, "I will draw all people to myself."

All people.
Not some.
Not those like us.
All.

May that vision shape our prayer, our politics, our compassion, and our life together.

Amen.