

Society for Ecumenical Studies

One: But How?

Sermon at Choral Evensong in the Cathedral and Abbey Church of Saint Alban

17th May 2003

At the Conference - May they all be one...but how?

Bishop Joe Aldred, the Church of God of Prophecy

It was as long ago as December 2001 when I first heard of this ecumenical event. I understood its remit then as wanting to grapple with the issue of how we who are privileged to be Christians living at the start of the 21st Century might seek to fulfil Jesus' prayer for the unity of his followers. My understanding of Christian unity is one predicated upon the quadrant concept of common worship, service, fellowship and witness. Much has been said about this in years gone by and we have added more words today, and so it is questionable whether what is needed are more words. I will try to be brief. Words seem particularly inadequate when we consider the events that have greeted us at the start of this new millennium, events that appear to demand a Christian response.

It feels like crisis has followed crisis, culminating in recent times with events like the tragic shootings in my home town of Birmingham at the start of this year, which resulted in the deaths of two teenagers and the wounding of two others. This was by no means an isolated incident; it was not the first nor has it been the last, but it seems to have caught the public imagination. Some of us feel certain that these and other tragic events point to underlying social and political issues of declining moral and spiritual values in our society. These call for our urgent attention and Christian action. Words are not enough.

Then there has been that other recent crisis of the 'so-called' war on terror that led to the invasion of Iraq led by the United States and the United Kingdom. I only wish to note the mixed results of the ousting of President Saddam Hussein's regime at the cost of thousands of lives of civilians and military people, the maiming of thousands of others, the inability to discover any of the cocked and ready to use weapons of mass destruction, and degree to which we appear to have stirred new waves of terror around the globe, adding to an already unstable situation. All this call for our attention and Christian action. Words are not enough.

Neither are words enough for the millions of minorities in Britain and the rest of Europe who feel discriminated against, and whose lives are made miserable by their exclusion from the benefits available in mainstream and the constant vulnerability of rootlessness and loss of identity. Some of these are new arrivals as asylum seekers, others have been here for many years, but their colour and culture mark them out as different from the majority. Already since the new millennium many have lost their lives while others continue to suffer racial attacks and abuse. If this was happening on the streets or at football matches only, it would be bad but not too bad. The truth is that the experience of many within the churches is little different. And this is not to deny the amount of effort going in to counter personal and institutionalised racism. These matters demand our attention and Christian action. Words are not enough.

But Christian action requires wisdom. Our Old Testament text from 1 Chronicles (*Note 1*) point to the tremendous need we have today to have among us some people at least who can discern our times and know what we ought to do. Among those who went out to Ziklag to pledge their support for the emergent King David, were mighty warriors bearing shields, commanders, leaders, young men, even some of David's own family members. The Chronicler notes too that among them were men of Issachar, who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do. One commentator suggests that this is a reference to their gifts of discernment of God's will for their day. (*Note 2*) Others believe that these men were proficient in the disciplines of astronomical and physical science, and that the Chronicler was attempting to demonstrate that David had in his support those of the intelligent and learned classes, not just military men. (*Note 3*) Whatever the apologetic may be, David appears to have had at his disposal some people who had discernment, men who understood the happenings of their day and how best to tackle them. Today, we need some people who, like the men of Issachar, understand our time and what we ought to do. I want to highlight three things that might help us answer the 'how' question.

Probably the first job the 'Issacharians' among us have is to determine what we mean by unity, by being one. It strikes me that too many of us confuse being one with being the same. It is interesting to me at least that Jesus' passionate prayer in John 17: makes no mention of ecclesial form, or doctrinal uniformity. His position, as the Head of the Church is very clear: 'May they all be one as we are one'. This is a oneness that allows me to retain my uniqueness, my particularity, yet not render me incompatible with you. It is a oneness that finds definition in Jesus himself, not in some manmade artificial determinant.

We can read this prayer either as a wish, or as a reality. I encourage you to read it as something realised. In Black church tradition we have a saying which goes: 'Jesus said it, I believe it, that makes it so'. It is quite liberating when we embrace the understanding that we Christians, of whatever denomination, of whatever skin colour, of whatever nationality belong to the one catholic church of Jesus Christ. I don't know about your families, but I am one of (at least) eleven – and if you understand Jamaican culture you will

understand the lack of specificity). We reside in three different countries, rarely meet, enjoy different levels of closeness, some of us don't really get on, but, but, but, we are the same mother and father's children. The basis of our intrinsic unity is our parentage. The position is quite simple, if you are my parents' child, you are my sibling. And so we can truly sing, 'you're my brother you're my sister, so take me by the hand...'

The second job the 'Issacharions' among us have is to insist that we get to know one another. Our real problem is that we are family and some of us have yet to meet each other on the level of understanding and empathy, share in each other's tradition, eat each other's food; spiritual and temporal. At the centre for Black and White Christian Partnership which many of you have known and loved, we made a policy of Christians getting to know each other, brushing away the cobwebs of ignorance, paternalism and prejudice. As Black-led met White-led, Pentecostal met Quaker, Black Catholic met Black Anglican, so we were able to demythologise, learn and unlearn, and discover family we had hid from because we thought we were so different from them. It was here that I learned the meaning of respect and that it is not just esteem or regard, but from the Latin *respecio*: re – meaning 'back' and specio – meaning to look. So, respect is to look back or again, implying to get to know, become familiar with, even to form relationship. Respect, I have resolved is about 'informed regard'. Christians deny ourselves vital resource, friendship, fellowship, nourishment, by not getting to know fellow brothers and sisters; children of our one heavenly Father.

A third job the 'Issacharions' among us have is to find ways for us the diverse family of God to act together in worship, service, fellowship and witness. Whilst for the most part we live in our separate homes, as families do, we surely must develop and retain the ability to come together at times of family celebrations or tragedy. We have set up structures which many of us then ignore and rarely if ever use. We have already in place, the World Council of Churches, the British Council of Churches (now Churches Together in Britain and Ireland), national and local Churches Together instruments, Local Ecumenical Partnerships, Fraternal, Pulpit Swaps, other alliances like the Evangelical Alliance, Churches Councils, etc. Someone from Mars might ask us, what are all these for? It is a good question, because when the invasion of Iraq was in the making and since we seem unable to come together to speak with one authoritative voice. When was the last time we laid aside our denominational straightjackets and celebrated together across colour, ethnicity, denominational and theological lines in honour of the one Lord Jesus who saved us? And when was the last time we truly washed each other's feet in sacrificial service?

There is an inverse iniquity implicit in that for as long as we remain unsure about our oneness, we may feel that we do not owe each other the Christian love our Lord has commanded of his children. However, by accepting each other at face value as fellow Christians, embracing each other's hurts, anxieties, frustrations and ambitions; in solidarity confronting injustice and unrighteousness together, wherever it is found, will lead to the world believing that God is indeed in us in Christ reconciling all things unto himself. So, in the

words of Fred Kaan, let us 'Go out! Love people! In the here and now!' Amen.
(Note 4)

1. The scripture for Evensong was Psalm 133, I Chronicles 12.23-32 (read by Dr Tina Beattie of Digby Stuart College, University of Surrey at Roehampton) & John 17.11-23 (read by His Grace Bishop Angaelos, General Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church)
2. Martin J Selman, *Tyndale O T Commentaries*
3. Jameson, Fauset, Brown, *Bethany Parallel Commentary*
4. From the hymn '*We meet, responsive to the Word of life*' by Fred Kaan, especially commissioned for the occasion.