

THE SOCIETY FOR ECUMENICAL STUDIES

‘MAY THEY ALL BE ONE’.....BUT HOW?

A Vision for the Future of Christian Unity - Ecumenical Conference, St Albans, Hertfordshire, England, 17th May 2003

Keynote Address by His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Revd Dr Rowan Williams

Thank you very much indeed for that welcome. I'm tempted to begin with the classic words, 'a funny thing happened to me on my way to this conference'.

Before we even begin to think about the question 'how', we need to think about 'what for'. Why exactly does Unity matter? What is its function in our theological thinking as well as our practical planning? And I want to begin with some reflections on what Unity is for - reflections which are stimulated by precisely that passage in Scripture from which the title of today is drawn.

What is Unity?

In those farewell discourses in St John's gospel, Unity appears as a function of the fact that believers are drawn into Jesus' own relation with God the Father, and Jesus' own movement, his eternal movement, into the depths of God the Father. Unity is what we call that harmonious movement into the Father which is the life of Jesus in eternity and in time. Woe betide us if we forget that the whole identity of the Church lies in that everlasting act of self-giving on the part of the everlasting Word to everlasting Source: the Son to the Father. Unity is therefore never simply the appearance of unanimity; it is never simply a matter of human agreement. It is most deeply, most fundamentally, what is happening in Jesus. In one of the greatest passages of theological writing in the twentieth century, Gregory Dix (I think about half way through his book, *The Shape of the Liturgy*) speaks of the one coming of Christ, which is the eternal coming of the Word to the Father, which is also the coming of Jesus in the flesh, which is also the coming of Jesus in the assembly of the Eucharist, which is also the coming of Jesus at the end of time to bring all things together and present everything to the Father. Now that I believe is a vision of Unity that gives us several lifetimes of work, but also several lifetimes of joy.

One thing I hope may emerge as we reflect today is that we need to balance the anxieties and challenges and struggles around Unity with some sense that there is also an agenda for joy in this. If we begin by asking what is Unity for,

and answering it in the terms that are put before us in the Fourth Gospel, maybe we shall understand a bit of that.

Unity and Mission

The second dimension of Unity that emerges in those same passages in St John's Gospel has to do, of course, with mission, as we have already been reminded: 'that they may be one, so that the world may believe'. When this extraordinary eternal movement of God to God becomes manifest in the human world, it is attractive; it draws the attention, the aspiration, the amazement and the delight of human beings. And, of course, the corollary of that is equally true, that when people are not struck with amazement, delight and attraction by the public life of the Church - and they are not always - it may just be because the eternal movement of Christ into the heart of God the Father is not made visible in our midst. But yes, Unity is so that the world may believe, the action of God made brightly manifest in the middle of our human confusions, so that people say, 'That is the journey on which I want to go', Jesus's journey into the heart of the Father who is his Source.

Recognizing and contemplation - a first pillar of a vision for Unity

So I am suggesting that the 'how' question must be shaped by those two things. And also perhaps that we need to get them in the right order. Effective, real Unity, Unity that is in Christ, is when we share in prayer and in mission at depth. So let me think aloud for a few moments about prayer and mission in this context. One of the great moments, you might say, in any enterprise of bringing Christians together is of recognition: 'The same act and gift of Jesus Christ is happening there as I believe and hope and trust is happening here.' We do things differently, say things differently, and yet when we pray together there is a recognisability - we see the same action at work, the same eternal prayer being prayed, the same eternal gift being given. And so we need, very simply, to give ourselves plenty of opportunities for such moments of recognition. And in our search for Unity the sharing of contemplation has to take a very important place.

In recent months and indeed in recent years I have seen this at work in two particular contexts which I will say a few words about. The first is through sharing in some of the work of the World Community for Christian Meditation, along with Fr Laurence Freeman. That group, inspired by the teachings of the Benedictine, John Main, continues to gather people from a variety of Christian traditions who share a common practice of contemplative prayer. When they meet for large events they have, we have, the remarkable experience of corporate silence for a long time shared by up to four hundred people sometimes. This is one enormous opportunity for recognition to happen. The simple fact of sitting in silence alongside somebody for quite a long time does

perhaps begin to impress upon you that you might be looking in the same direction, or walking in the same way.

The vision and the theology of the World Community of Christian Meditation has been spelled out in numerous books by Fr Laurence Freeman and others, and it is profoundly grounded in the vision of St John's Gospel. But there is *one* very simple way in which the recognition of what is most fundamental in Unity comes alive for a very striking variety of people. One thing I have certainly learned in work with the World Community is that there is no stereotypical member of it, whether in denominational or temperamental terms. I have also had this year the experience of sharing the life of the ecumenical Community of Bose for a short time, where again a corporate life of praise and contemplation mixes some austerity with a great and joyful engagement with an enormous cultural and theological world. That experience again demonstrates where the heart and the energy of Unity is perhaps most to be found.

In our search for deeper and fuller Unity, I believe that we need to return again and again to those opportunities and situations which allow us to share most deeply in that contemplative immersion in Jesus' relation to the Father. It can be done on the basis of the dispersed community sharing common practices and assumptions, like the World Community for Christian Meditation; it can be realised also in the residential ecumenical Community devoted, not only to work, but to silence together and praise together.

Then, on mission, again recognition is central to this process. We recognise in each other (don't laugh!) the same attractiveness, which is not of course ours but Christ's. Mission together is a way of saying 'In this Christian tradition and this Christian community, the radiance and the beauty of Christ is to be seen'. Now, the history of mission is an interesting and rather sobering exercise for anybody committed to Unity and has been from quite early days, in fact. Whether it's Jesuits and Franciscans battling over the Christianisation of Japan in the 16th and 17th centuries, whether it's French, Catholic and English Protestant, and indeed Scottish Protestant, missionaries arguing in the presence of the Kabaka of Uganda in the 19th century, much of our mission history could be summed up in those not very edifying words 'Don't listen to him, listen to me'. Mission in the context of the vision of Unity is, perhaps more importantly, saying 'Don't listen to me; listen to Christ - and listen to Christ there, as well as here' - because Christ is such that no one person can say everything about him. That's why there's a Church at all. It's a very obvious point, but it does no harm to underline it again: no one person can say everything about Christ. So it is a community that talks of Christ - it is a *community* that talks of Christ - not an individual or a set of individuals, but a group of people continuously engaging with one another and, yes, sometimes arguing with one another; but (if they know their business) returning to the fundamental insight, 'I can't say it all; and there are things which you must say, and your tradition must say and do, because I can't exhaust it in what I say'.

I suspect that is one of the gifts that the ecumenical movement has brought to thinking about mission as the twentieth century has gone on: an increasing sense that we are not simply negotiating our way towards a formula that we can just about live with, but an awareness that what another tradition, just like another person, another believing person, may say is what I need to complete what I cannot say, and we cannot say. And what that word would be that would be said by all Christians speaking, working and indeed singing together - what that word would be - is unimaginable, because it would be a word that would compel, that would attract, in a way that we can only dream about.

So we work in mission to commend the beauty and attractiveness of Christ in each other's traditions. And there is a very important element in our mission, in our engagement with a world that does not yet believe - a very important element - which has to do with saying, 'I don't expect to be able to give you the complete picture. Listen to *us*, rather than me; listen to Christ, rather than me'. And, in saying that, we begin to give a sense to the listening world that what we are talking about is something transcendent, something which exceeds all that can be said about it, whose freedom is beauty and whose radiance can never be exhausted by one perspective. And if the world is to be converted to faith, rather than religion, that needs to happen.

You can, of course, sign people up for religion without very much attention to faith. You can persuade people that this is a set of clear answers to clear questions which will satisfy you. And yet faith requires, once again, that self-forgetting, that self-abandoning in the stream of Christ's life, which can only be drawn and evoked, I believe, by ways of saying, 'Nothing can exhaust this'. So Unity and mission together in that sense - making mission more effective because it is making clearer the scale of the reality to which we are seeking, stumblingly and clumsily, to draw the attention of the human world.

Practically speaking, I have already spoken a bit about the way in which corporate life - corporate, contemplative and meditative life - has to become more and more the heartbeat of our search for Unity. Perhaps one of the lessons learned in the last quarter of the twentieth century might be summed up by saying, 'We need a depth in our search for Unity'. That has not always been there when our talk about Unity has been preoccupied with negotiation. And that depth will come when we are prepared to take those risks of silence together, not quite knowing what God will give us in that process. Contemplation then as a first pillar of a vision for Unity.

Pilgrimage - a second pillar

But I want to suggest three other pillars in a vision for Unity, which I think grow out of this, and the second is pilgrimage. We are here in a place where ecumenical pilgrimage is a regular, significant, and much appreciated aspect of our life together. But we live generally in a context where pilgrimage has been and is being rediscovered as a fundamental category of Christian thinking and Christian action. Our search for Unity is not only in itself a

pilgrimage, a journey with Christ into Christ's relation with his Abba, it can also be expressed, quite simply, in the practice of pilgrimage, where the sheer fact of walking together becomes a transforming reality. Very many of those who have shared pilgrimage in this way over the years, across the boundaries of denominational and confessional divisions will recognise this. Whether here in St Albans, in Jerusalem, in Taizé, in Walsingham, people have found that the literal fact of journeying together towards God in Christ makes a difference to how they think about the Church itself.

Festival - a third pillar

Contemplation, pilgrimage. The third category, rather obviously coming out of pilgrimage, and ideally coming at the end of pilgrimage, is festival. How often do we as individual churches, or as churches together, quite simply celebrate our reality as Church? In the Anglican Communion we have been discussing recently, and shall be discussing further (in fact next week), the possibility of a major international Anglican gathering in 2008, designed not as some kind of discussion forum for issues but as an exploration and celebration of what it is to be Anglican. The German model of the Kirchentag, where you simply get together to learn about what it is to be Christians and to be glad about it, is one which I think can be used ecumenically as well as within individual confessions. And corporate celebration of what it is to be Church can relate, I believe, very closely to what was said just now about mission. It can be a way of saying, 'I don't know, but I know someone who does'; a way of saying, 'I can't tell you everything, but here we are as a collaborative enterprise in witness'.

Service - a fourth pillar

And from that comes the obvious fourth pillar of service, the celebration not only of what we are together, but the celebration of the world which calls us in Christ's name. Now, the various ways in which that becomes real, I don't need to spell out too closely. You will be familiar with examples such as the ecumenical community at Corrymeela, or the way in which the L'Arche communities have more and more worked as ecumenical models; and that for me is the very particularly poignant and significant element in our search for Unity - the witness of those who live together with people with serious disability as Christians celebrating together, sharing as Jean Vanier loves to say, 'a common poverty'. That for many people here and throughout the world in the L'Arche communities is a vision of Unity which cuts quite across many of our regular assumptions about what the agenda is. Because here, once again, is celebration going on, and I would dare to say in the L'Arche communities you find all the elements I have mentioned: contemplation, pilgrimage and festival, all focussed in service. Much of all this has to do with a vision of Unity as celebrating the image of God in one another and, to round

off what I want to say this morning, let me just think about that for a moment or two together.

The church is a community in which Christ gives in each to all; a community in which Christ gives in each to all. And therefore, when we recognise the gift of Christ, we recognise in each other the image of God's eternal giving. One of the most important things that can ever happen to a Christian community is when it breaks through a particular kind of pain barrier and learns to be grateful for the person 'next'. It is difficult for each one of us, because the person next to you is not always the person you instinctively want to give thanks for - even in Christian congregations. And you may be even less inclined to give thanks for the church next to you, down the street. But recognising the image, recognition of the gift that God gives, the Christ-like gift given in all the diversity of discipleship, that seems to me to be a category that holds together much of what I have been trying to say about prayer and about mission as the fundamental categories.

Sharing the Eucharist - Growing in association with Christ's journey to the Father

And that leads to a last thought on this, relating to one of the most sensitive, not to say, neuralgic, elements in our thinking about Unity; and that is to do with the Eucharist. the Eucharist which is the place where most profoundly, most comprehensively, Christian believers are associated with 'the movement of Jesus Christ to his eternal source', as Gregory Dix says. Our deepest form of association with Christ's journey, Christ's movement in the Church, is the Eucharist, and so our inability to share that with one another is inevitably, proportionately, deeply painful.

Yet, that being said, two considerations should be borne in mind. One is that the Eucharist is not the sole sacrament; and the recognition in one another of the graces of baptism, the recognition in one another therefore of that image of God in Christ which is being shaped in the other, the recognition, if you like, of the sacrament of the neighbour, is something which ought to be set alongside our unavoidable anxieties and conflicts over what we can and can't celebrate together in the Eucharist.

Secondly, I spoke of the Eucharist as the place where the deepest form of association with Christ's movement to the Father occurs. But, even in the process of mission itself, it can take time to arrive there. I, like many of you, have watched, been involved with, and thought about, mission enterprises that have quite properly and necessarily taken time to get to a Eucharistic pattern, because somehow the association with Christ implicit in the heart of the Eucharist is not something which can instantly be grasped and put before people as a solution. People will grow into it. And I hope and trust that that growth together happens between churches as well as in local mission enterprises.

Our churches have very different understandings of the appropriate point at which we can make Eucharist together. Today is not an occasion where we are likely to resolve those points, with the best will in the world; and I don't pretend that we shall. But I note those two themes, which might at least qualify some of our grief and frustration about Eucharistic sharing: first, there is a proper sacrament of the neighbour to be recognised in the Body of Christ, second, there is a proper process of growing in to the fullness of that association, within and between our communities.

Unity fulfilling our destiny to be living images of God

So, let me return as I end to where I began. What is Unity for? It is for the reconciliation of creation with Creator. It is for the fulfilment of our human destiny to be living images of God. With that in mind, we may at least be able to form broad strategies of shared vision, in contemplation, and pilgrimage, and festival, and service, which remind us that negotiation about what has divided us is not where the lifeblood of Unity flows. And if we are able to contemplate, to walk on pilgrimage, to celebrate, and to serve, and, yes, to sing together, who knows what the attractiveness of such a collaboration might be?