

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

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

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.

Unity the Movement of Christ to the Father

First, in those farewell discourses in St John's Gospel Unity appears as a function of the fact that believers are drawn into Jesus's own relation with God the Father and Jesus's 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 the 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. 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 in the terms that are put before us in the Fourth Gospel, maybe we shall understand a bit of that.

Unity the Mission of God to the World

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

And 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; we say things differently; and yet when we pray together there is a recognizability – 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. 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 a 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 is why there is a Church at all. It is 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 that you must say, and your tradition must say and do, because I can't exhaust it in what I say'.

I suspect that that is one of the gifts that the ecumenical movement has brought, after 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 making clearer the scale of the reality to which we are seeking stumblingly, clumsily, to draw the attention of the human world.

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 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.

Festival – a third pillar

A third category, rather obviously coming out of pilgrimage, and ideally coming at the end of pilgrimage: festival. How often do we as individual churches, or as churches together, quite simply celebrate our reality as Church? 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. The Church is a community in which Christ gives in each to all. And therefore, when we recognize the gift of Christ, we recognize 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 recognizing the image, recognition of the gift that God gives, the Christlike 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 into 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: 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; 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 recognized in the Body of Christ; second, there is a proper process of growing into 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?

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