

## Sermon for St Alban, Holborn

Christian Unity Sunday - 21 January 2007

### *Zephaniah 3: 16-20*

On that day this must be the message to Jerusalem:

Fear not Zion, let not your hands hang limp.

The Lord your God is in your midst,

A warrior who will keep you safe.

He will rejoice over you and be glad;

He will show you his love once more;

He will exalt over you with a shout of joy

As on a festal day.

I shall take away your cries of woe

And you will no longer endure reproach.

When that time comes;

I shall deal with all who oppress you;

I shall rescue the lost and gather the

Dispersed.

I shall win for my people praise and

Renown

Throughout the whole world.

When that time comes I shall gather you

And bring you home.

I shall win you renown and praise

Among all the peoples of the earth,

When I restore your fortunes before your eyes.

It is the Lord who speaks.

### *1 Corinthians 1: 10-13*

I appeal to you, my friends, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: agree among yourselves, and avoid divisions; let there be complete unity of mind and thought. My friends it has been brought to my notice by Chloe's people that there are many quarrels among you. What I mean is this: each of you is saying, 'I am for Paul,' or 'I am for Apollos'; 'I am for Cephas,' or 'I am for Christ'. Surely Christ has not been divided! Was it Paul who was crucified for you? Was it in Paul's name that you were baptized?

### *John 17: 20-26*

It is not for these alone that I pray but for those also who through their words put their faith in me. May they all be one; as you, Father, are in me and I in you, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. The glory which you gave me I have given to them, that they may be one, as we are one; I in them and you in me, may they be perfectly one. Then the world will know that you sent me, and that you loved them as you loved me.

'Father they are your gift to me; and my desire is that they may be with me where I am, so that they may look upon my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the world began. Righteous Father, although the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you sent me. I made your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love you had for me may be in them, and I in them.'

## Sermon Text

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Before I launch into what I have prepared to share this morning, may I thank Fr Levitt for the kind and challenging invitation to come and preach on the subject of Christian Unity. As a Roman Catholic member of staff who is deeply privileged to be involved in the training of the next generation of Anglican clergy this is a subject that I am both passionate about but also I hope realistic about as I encounter its dilemmas and joys pretty much daily.

"May they all be one; as you, Father, are in me and I in you, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me."

This is the week of prayer for Christian Unity: a week which since its institution by the Roman Catholic Church and World Council of Churches in 1966 has become an annual focal point for all Christian denominations to celebrate, take stock, repent and re-orient themselves to the costly project of seeking full Christian Unity. If we consider the goal of this week each year as marking clear progress towards structural or organic unity between the churches one might be forgiven for feeling a little depressed and dispirited as we slide into our pews this morning. Whilst we can rightly celebrate that dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion through the International ARCIC process has produced moving and useful reflections on the Eucharist, on Authority and most recently on devotion to Mary, and that dialogue between Anglicans and Methodists has borne fruit through the Anglican Methodist Covenant, many feel that progress has been unforgivably slow. And perhaps given developments such as the ordination of women and the danger of schism within the Anglican Communion as well as a hardening of line in Rome hopes for unity have become a hopeless cause. I have to say that, on a slightly more light-hearted note, even my laptop has taken against the process - when typing the acronym for Churches together in Wales, CYTUN, into my laptop my computer automatically changes CYTUN to 'Satan'! And yet anecdotally I guess that many of you will be able to remember times in the not so distant past when relationships between our churches were much poorer - I remember as a child in Manchester being instructed gravely that I must not so much as enter an Anglican Church and being able to say even the Lords Prayer together, let alone contemplate any joint worship, seemed impossible. I teach in a Federal institution in which Methodist, Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox and URC students, lay and ordained are formed for ministry side by side guided by the motto 'roots down, walls down'. So I believe that we can be neither rosy eyed nor overly pessimistic about this process towards unity, and yet as new checkpoints seem to open along what John Paul II called 'the road with no exit', new impetus is needed.

And tough questions of unity are yet more complex when we read what is written across billboard and TV screen, when media headline chatter is of the painful divisions within single denominations; of the two-dimensional account of religion offered by Richard Dawkins and others portraying religion crudely as intolerant, violent and fundamentalist by turn. But it is not to the cacophony of headlines that I want to turn to find hope against hope for unity this morning, but rather I want to begin with the symphony of Scripture and our liturgical season. This is a symphony that sings of an ethic of encounter and mission and a command for reconciliation, not for our own sake but for that of the world. **"May they all be one", Jesus pleads with the Father in John's Gospel, "that the world may believe that you have sent me"**. But before we can turn fully towards these themes we might do well to name a few of the lessons of history and confront the tempting, siren voices that call away from unity – separation does not offer an answer to human difference and disagreement. Religious divorce never brings the longed-for purer religion. The world presses 'mute' when we speak of peace and reconciliation but cannot visibly practice it, showing what it means to rise with the wounds in our hands and side.

So, what might it mean to talk of encounter and reconciliation?

As a part insider, part outsider to the Church of England, one of the great gifts of an Anglican understanding of the church is the insistence that the church is practised into being, practised into being through liturgy and through social action. For me this is the fruit of the great interaction between St Benedict and Archbishop Cranmer echoed through the poetry of Herbert and Eliot, and the legacy of churches like this one. For the church to be practised into unity in a new generation facing dilemmas new and ancient will depend more than anything on a willingness of the church to practice into being a *spirituality of encounter and reconciliation*. This is the terrain of hope, of encounter and of wounding that I would like to say a little more about this morning by reflecting on the positioning of this week of prayer for Christian unity in the liturgical calendar and by sharing the thoughts of a Roman Catholic ecumenist.

One of the great joys of being a Roman Catholic worshiping in an Anglican setting at this time of year is that I get the chance to keep Anglican Epiphanytide when my own church has already plunged into ordinary time. There is something wonderful about holding onto the sense of movement and pilgrimage through this season – Epiphanytide presents us with a dramatic cascade of ‘showings forth’ as Jesus faces and gathers his world – this is a drama of encounter with shepherd and magi, between John and Jesus, the drama of the first miracle at Cana and culminating in the encounter with Anna and Simeon as Jesus is presented in the Temple. For Roman Catholics beginning ‘ordinary time’ following the birth of Christ the emphasis of similar readings falls upon the theme of Jesus calling an unlikely caravan of people. These are people he gathers, heals and orders towards each other and towards his Father – over the next few weeks we will hear the stories of the call of the disciples, of the ministry of Jesus amongst tax collectors, prostitutes and lepers. Beyond the social conventions of his time Jesus pushes relentlessly at the divisions which separate, insisting that we belong together, and perhaps more controversially suggesting that what it means to be truly and fully human is both to *belong* to other people and to *delight* in other people. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century monk Thomas Merton writes this in his journal after a short walk into town:

“It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God himself glorified in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! To think that such a common place realisation should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in the cosmic sweepstake. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking round shining like the sun...there are no strangers”.

Merton’s vision which comes to him as he observes the comings and goings of an ordinary street seem so close to the core message of encounter and embrace that lies at the heart of Epiphany-tide as well as the message of gathering and ordering a community-of-the-unlikely which the Roman emphasis reveals. From the crib to the cross the unlikely people are drawn together in Jesus. This is the season of costly and rich encounter that sandwiches this week of Unity.

Philip Sheldrake, himself a RC who taught Spirituality at Westcott a number of years ago was invited earlier this year by a group of Anglicans to offer a manifesto for keeping faith with reconciliation in the Anglican Communion. For Sheldrake when we look at the life of individuals or institutions we recognise that the practice of reconciliation has at its foundation a complex balance between structural change and spiritual harmony. For him the start to a process of reconciliation begins with a basic willingness to rebalance power so that those embarking on a costly conversation are at least equal in dialogue. For him practising reconciliation also means being willing to confront fear and loathing (the tendency to generalise, demonise, colonise, trivialise or simply to ignore) and it is also to resist the temptation when conflict arises to engage in emotionally satisfying superficial action (to detain dissidents, to expel immigrants, to marginalise opponents). Those of us who have been involved in resolving (or perhaps causing) conflicts either at home or in the work place will perhaps relate to these insights, we might even want to add a few of our own to his list. But Sheldrake pushes a deeper question – what is distinctly Christian about costly reconciliation? Reflecting on the image of the cross he stresses that at the heart of costly reconciliation is the search for what he calls rather illusively ‘the mystery of the whole’. For Sheldrake the ‘mystery of the whole’ is most clearly located in the Eucharist.

The search for unity and for the whole is not the search for the missing piece of the jigsaw, the cherry on the pie, in other words what already seems like it is mine and belongs to me but has been irritatingly misplaced and ought to be restored. No, it is the search for the things and the people that remain strange, the things that I cannot simply assimilate but which must be gathered. This is a deep and true desire within us, but it is one that can trouble us deeply. And so the search for unity is a profoundly receptive movement. God asks that we are prepared first and foremost to receive. In today's Gospel Christ acknowledges to the Father that he has received humanity as a gift, 'Father they are your gift to me, and my desire is that they may be with me where I am'. To be a Eucharistic people, reconciled to each other, is to be a people continually willing to stretch out our hands to receive as we stand side by side gathered with Christ. This is true hospitality. This is something I have come to understand painfully and viscerally at Westcott. Despite the fact that Westcott is my primary community of worship, the place in which I am known, I teach, I risk, and I fail, this is the place in which I cannot stretch out my hands to receive communion during Mass. I therefore approach with my arms crossed across my chest to indicate that I would like a blessing. The blessing I receive is always moving and is important to me. This year one of my new students told me that my crossed arms disturbed her. She has worked in the theatre and for her the crossing of arms is a sign of death. This gesture for her cannot be a sign of receptivity. Whilst we cannot receive at the same table the Eucharistic community is marked by scandal. Signs of non-receptivity woven into our personal lives as much as the lives of our churches are signs of dis-grace, they move away from the roots of reconciliation. And so catholicity will never be rooted in our possessive and scandalous claims to the words Christian and Catholic but in a desire to receive God's catholicity. Sheldrake says of such catholicity: "Genuine catholicity implies giving space to everything and everyone that God gives space to", this does not lead to a moment of sudden reconciliation and forgiveness this side of the cross when the slate is wiped clean but leads us, as Martin Luther King famously said to realise that forgiveness and reconciliation are a permanent way of life – they like the church are practised into being.

If we resist the challenge to rub up alongside each other, to grant space to each other, to take Merton at his word and really believe the great secret 'that each of us shines like the sun', we can only estimate that the costs are likely to be high. It means Dawkins and his compatriots need barely polish and nuance their arguments against religious faith at all – for we will have already kicked the ball into the back of our own goal.

Our task especially during the week of prayer for Christian Unity could be to find small ways to practice encounter and reconciliation. We do not carry the burden of creating this work of unity alone, this work is created each time we approach the Eucharistic table with our hands and hearts stretched open to receive our Lord Jesus Christ. It is he who risen and yet bearing his wounds calls us on along the road.

Amen.