

Seventh Sunday of Easter - 2018

'Ecumenical conversation is not an exercise in diplomacy; once we think of it in that way we think that, if anything actually moves in this deadlock, this is because someone has made a concession, has compromised with principles, has watered down the truth. This is a disastrous illusion. True ecumenism is not diplomacy: it is kneeling and listening, in the presence of God, with brothers and sisters in Christ from whom the accidents of history have divided us, and asking God how we may learn from one another' – The Rev'd Professor Henry Chadwick

Today we begin the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, these special times have been marked since 1908. The French Abbot Paul Couturier who has been called "the father of spiritual ecumenism", advocated prayer "for the unity of the Church as Christ wills it, and in accordance with the means he wills." So what is the will of Christ for the unity of the Church?

When we say our farewells to those we love we will often leave them with a set of instructions: take care, drive carefully, make sure you have a clean hanky! I recall my Mother telling me to be good, say please and thank you, eat what you're given etc. I'm sure all have similar tales. Jesus doesn't do this when he farewells his friends. John's gospel recalls, a speech, in which he *prays* for his disciples but he doesn't leave instructions.

Trying to follow the progression of Jesus prayer narrative that we heard this morning is not easy. Even sitting quietly it takes a few goes to get the drift of what Jesus is saying and praying. The thrust of the part of the prayer we heard this morning is that Jesus is acknowledging that the disciples were gifted to him by his Father, he in turn has shepherded them, kept them together and he offers them back to God. They are worthy of God's love because they have responded to Jesus; Jesus has been glorified in them. Usually it is God that is glorified in Jesus but here we see this succession this handing on, Jesus is now glorified in those he has nurtured and they will reveal him when he is no longer physically present. Jesus recognizes that this will be difficult, dangerous even and he seeks God's protection on those who will continue his work. This will be achieved through them being kept together 'Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.'

The popularity of the ecumenical movement has ebbed and flowed over many years. During my time as a curate, I would often be sent off to ecumenical services and no doubt many of you have attended them. The text usually chosen is that which we heard today 'that they all may be one.' It's very moving and should indeed draw us to prayer and reflection. But should we all be dashing down to the Baptists or over Macarthur Avenue to St Joeys? Or indeed should they be dashing over here to us? It would be lovely if they did of course I would love to see more folk join us, but does that further the Kingdom of God? No it doesn't. It might improve our finances make our returns to the Diocese look good and enable me to boast

at Deanery meetings, but these things have nothing to do with the Gospel of Christ.

Jesus prays three times for unity. He prays that we would be completely one as he and the Father are one. That Jesus is *praying to the Father* for our oneness, rather than giving instructions, means that unity is of and from God. It is not something we do or create. It is the very life and being of God. We do not establish unity, we participate in and manifest to the world the already existing oneness that is God and if our unity is modelled on the unity of the Father and the Son then this unity must allow for diversity.

There has always been division in the Church...there always will be. The 19th Century was a time of division in the church not so dissimilar to that which we face today. One of the parties known as The Oxford Movement endeavoured to bring the church back to its ancient roots; it looked back to a time before the great divisions of the Church into East and West. Later on Archbishop of Canterbury Fisher was to state 'we have no doctrines of our own but those of the *undivided* church' perhaps number one being the Trinity. Trinitarian doctrine states that the Father and the Son whilst one are also distinct persons. Now we can visualise the Trinity as a triangle – God the Father at the top with the Son and the Spirit at the other points of the triangle. But perhaps the Greek Fathers are more helpful; many of those 19th Century Anglicans thought so and looked to the Greek model for a glimpse of unity that is consistent with that which Jesus spoke of.

The Greek's called it 'Perichoresis.' It means literally being-in-one-another, permeation without confusion. Think of a divine dance; the three persons of the Trinity moving in perfect choreography, they are perfect unity in diversity. Think of Ballroom dancers perfectly in union, moving as one and yet individual people. The key to their unity is dialogue, unceasing dialogue and this model must be ours if we are to fulfil the unity that Jesus speaks of and calls us to. And I don't mean chat, but communication that involves silence, listening, praying, understanding. There are different members of the Body of Christ each has a function, we are part of that Body and we have a very particular function to play in the Church. To be a part however we need to be in dialogue, with the Lutherans, Baptists, and Presbyterians and yes even with our fellow Anglicans. But we must have and need diversity, (Paul tells us this is a good thing), but not division. Thomas Merton describes "The heresy of individualism: thinking oneself a completely self-sufficient unity and asserting this imaginary 'unity' against all others."

The God we worship, is perfect unity and Jesus prays us be part of that unity. Jesus is not calling for ecumenism the way we sometimes might understand it. He is not asking us to dash over the road. He is calling on us to be faithful to the nature of the God in whom we live and move and have our being. Amen.