

RELIGION -INCLUSIVE OR EXCLUSIVE

MARTIN CAMROUX

This year is the Centenary not simply of Trinity Church but also of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It was in 1908 that an American Anglican Paul Wattson had the idea of coming together to pray for unity. What a marvellous vision. Of course success has not been total. Today the worldwide Anglican Communion is breaking apart with rival Anglican churches being set up to face each other down. This might be a good moment to have a week of prayer for Anglican Unity! But we have come an incredibly long way. Working together, worshipping together is today just natural. Tonight I'm delighted that the Bishop of Southwark, Tom Butler, will be preaching at the Unity Week service which this year is being held at Trinity. It seemed natural to us to ask him as our Bishop, to our Centenary.

Christian unity remains a vital task. But I wonder now if it isn't time to widen out the search for religious unity? One of the inspirations behind the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity were some words of a French Roman Catholic Cardinal Mercier who said:

*In order to unite with one another, we must love one another;
in order to love one another, we must know one another;
in order to know one another, we must go and meet one another.*

That is what we have done. We've met, we've worshiped together, we've worked together and we've found how much we have in common.

I wonder today who are the people we need to meet in order to get to know and to love in order to break down barriers and offer hope to the world? Can I suggest the vital barriers are no longer between different Christian Churches? They are between religions. Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Sikh. Can we live together? Can we learn to love each other? In our time no one has put this more clearly than a German Roman Catholic, Hans Kung:

"No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions"

It's the same agenda only wider.

There is a story about a Christian minister living abroad during World War II. His congregation sent him money so that he can return home for Christmas. When he doesn't come back, they ask him why. He says that he used the money to help a group of Jews escape Hitler's death camps and flee to safety.

"But they're not even Christian," writes one member of his congregation.

"Yes, I know," the minister responds. "But I am."

All religions have both types of people - the exclusive and the inclusive. With the exclusive their religion makes them dislike others and care only about the people who look like them, talk like them and pray like them. Inclusive religion looks outwards to others and seeks to love those most in need, regardless of creed.

Today we know what exclusive religion leads to. I saw exclusive religion recently in North Cyprus. When the Turks took over the North most of the churches were destroyed and vandalised. Today you can see shattered church buildings with insulting graffiti on the walls. I have seen exclusive religion in former Yugoslavia where you can see Catholic Churches in Croatia which were shelled and destroyed by Orthodox Serbs. I have seen exclusive religion in Northern Ireland in the obscene drawings of hooded gunmen who some in both communities paraded on their walls as a badge of their hatred. I saw exclusive religion in America when Bailey Smith, the head of the Southern Baptists said "God almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew". We saw exclusive religion here in London when in the name of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate, Islamic terrorists, blew their fellow citizens to pieces with bombs on tubes and buses. Today if exclusive religion wins it necessarily pits groups against one another based on identity, and it means that people like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens are right - religion will destroy everything.

There is another tradition of faith. This is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer is one of my faith heroes. A German Lutheran religious scholar and pastor, he was one of the most important leaders in the resistance to Hitler in Germany, ultimately dying for his cause. After Kristallnacht, when the Nazis set about destroying the Jewish synagogues, he said to his fellow Christians on German radio, "Those who did not stand up for the Jews do not deserve to sing Gregorian Chants." Bonhoeffer was one who saw in his faith a widening not a narrowing of his love. Another of my heroes is Harry Emerson Fosdick. When they built Riverside Church in the 1930s it's often commented that he put Darwin and Einstein in stone as a sign the Church is concerned with scientific truth. Less noted are the statues of Mohammed and Buddha as a sign that the Church welcomes religious insights wherever they come from. If inclusive faith wins, it opens the possibility for faith communalities to use their particular narratives to articulate a collective vision that includes everybody. If that isn't the future, there will be no future.

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This is a challenge for all religious traditions. It is certainly a challenge for Islam. Much of Islam has never really come to terms with the idea of freedom of conscience or an open attitude towards other faiths. But there are progressive voices in Islam. In a splendid letter in the Telegraph Dr Taj Hargey, of the Muslim educational centre of Oxford recently challenged the Muslim Council of Britain over what it has to say about the Mullah endorsed calls for capital punishment for converting out of Islam or the practice of stoning adulteress to death. He writes "the Muslim Council justifies concealment of women's faces, it condones self-righteous literary censorship, it reinforces educational apartheid with Islamic faith schools, and it promotes a ghetto mentality for British Muslims. All this .. has no place in 21st Century Brittan. Growing numbers of thinking Moslems recognise the imperative to integrate fully into the British mainstream. This will be achieved without compromising our religious identity by practicing a progressive, pluralistic Islam, rooted in and relevant to contemporary Britain not some distant ancestral homeland or an un-Koranic theology".

Our task in to support and affirm and reach out to Muslims who seek that kind of identity. And we do this in the name of Jesus Christ and as part of our discipleship to him. Will Campbell is a witty, salty Southern Baptist preacher and social activist. In a book he called *Soul among Lions*, he observes that "most of the serious wars today are by people of competing religions. That's absurd. Let's do it this way: Judaism is the oldest of the three

major faiths. Christianity is the adolescent in the middle, and Islam is the youngest. The youngest is generally the favoured in the family. So let's all go to their house, all kneel on a rug and put our heads to the ground and pray, vowing as we do never to kill one another again in the name of God."

Can I suggest to you for us this is not a matter of prudence. At the heart of Christian faith is that Jesus who they called the Prince of Peace. It is that Jesus who said "love your enemies do good to those who hate you". The conflict between him and the Pharisees was between inclusive and exclusive faith.

They came to him once and they said "Who is my neighbour?". In other words where do I draw the line? Who is in and who is out? And he said - once there was a man travelling on the Jericho and he fell among thieves and they left him bleeding by the side of the road. And the first man by was a priest. And he sees the man and he passes by on the other side. And then a Levite. They are a kind of junior clergy. And he too passes by on the other side. And then comes a Samaritan. Someone of a despised heretical faith and a mixed racial background. And he stops to binds the man's wounds. So the hero of the story is the man who loves across the religious boundaries. "Which of these men was the neighbour?" asks Jesus. "The one who showed kindness" they say. "Well go and do the same". Why has it proved so difficult for us to learn that lesson?

Wide, wide as the ocean, high as the Heaven above;
Deep, deep as the deepest sea is my Savior's love.

Says Paul "I may have faith strong enough to move mountains but if I have no love I am nothing". Says John "Those who say I love God, and hate their brothers and sisters are liars". That's the message that one of these days is going to put exclusive Christianity out of business and it can't be too soon.

*Rev'd. Martin Camroux MA
Trinity Church, Sutton
(United Reformed/Methodist)
Cheam Road, Sutton, SM1 1DZ*