

MAY THEY ALL BE ONE

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In 1942 in his enthronement sermon the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple called the Ecumenical Movement “the great new fact of our era”. Today looking back at the 20th Century we can see it as one great movements of the Spirit.

Here in this Church we have been deeply affected by it. This is a joint United Reformed and Methodist congregation, everyone who comes into this Church shares in both our churches. Then also we share in a local ecumenical project with the Church of England and Sutton Baptist. So this is vital to our life.

You can measure the effect of the ecumenical movement in all sorts of ways. Let me tell you a true story. In 1956 Derek Warlock was private secretary to the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster. In this capacity he went to see the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, about an interdenominational meeting which was to be held in the Albert Hall. Of course he said he knew there could be no shared act of worship but perhaps the Lord's Prayer could be said together. But if so what form of the Lord's Prayer should be used - the one normally used by Catholics or the one normally used by Anglicans? To try and solve the dilemma Warlock asked Fisher if it might be said in silence. Fisher exploded. This was monstrous. "Haven't you Romans lived in this country long enough" he demanded "to know that we are the establishment and you must toe the line." Warlock rose and asked to withdraw and as he left to go down the Lambeth Palace stairs he heard Fisher shouting after him. "Aggression. It's Papal Aggression".

Only 45 years ago. If today that story is incomprehensible to us that is the result of the ecumenical movement. In England we are used to united services to shared membership of council of churches, to ecumenical clergy fraternals, to united worship and there are hundreds of united churches such as this one.

Without doubt this is of God. Before Jesus goes out to the Garden of Gethsemane and from there to a cross he prays for those he will soon leave behind. "May they all be one" he says. What has been going in the Churches these last 100 years has been a meeting of that prayer. This morning I want to look at the unity we share.

Firstly unity is enriching. Two ministers from very different denominations once found themselves travelling together on a train to preaching engagements. They sat staring at each other for a bit. And then one of felt he ought to break the silence “Since we’re both on the Lord's business can we share some fellowship together”? The other drew back and looked at his colleague somewhat uneasily. "Aye" he said "I suppose we are both on the Lord's business. You in your way, and I in his".

Few of us I hope would say such a thing today. Many of our attitudes, however, still witness to an unconscious arrogance. Brought up as we are on our own traditions we imagine our own ways of doing things are always better than any one else's. But what we have learning is that the whole truth of God can never be seen from one just standpoint or expressed in any one tradition. Always we can be enriched by the experience of others. There is an immense richness in sharing our traditions with each other.

Take one example from our worship. I remember some years ago in one of my churches we had a candlelit service of 9 lessons and carols for the first time. One lady was deeply upset: "Candles!" she cried in outrage "this isn't Presbyterianism this is Catholicism". She was nearly right! The service of 9 Lessons and Carols isn't Presbyterian or URC or Methodist in origin. It was first put together by Eric Milner-White and used in King's College Chapel in Cambridge in 1919. So basically it's Anglican. Now today we'd all feel something was missing in Christmas without it. We've all been enriched by this gift from the Anglican tradition.

Or look at me. Wearing a cassock and a stole. 100 years ago no Nonconformist minister wore either. Looking at me they would have said your half way to Rome. And really the lady was right about the candles too. It is a Catholic or an Orthodox tradition. And none the worse for that. Unity is enriching. Thank God for the way unity enriches all our lives.

Secondly real unity is about accepting and celebrating diversity. Maybe this is the most important thing we've learnt about unity these last few years. What does it mean to be united? One possibility is this. Unity means becomes the same. We agree on what we believe so we all believe the same. We harmonise our worship. We agree on patterns of ministry. We move as far as possible into one united Church.

All sorts of people have this idea of unity. The Roman Catholic Church will not allow Protestants to receive communion in their churches. Because they would say until we are agreed about the mass how can we possibly share it together?

Or a couple of years ago when I was in Birkenhead a new church was built just along the road from us. It had no name plaque or notice board outside so I wrote a letter welcoming them to the area and saying that I hope we could come to share fellowship together. I got a reply. "Firstly we already do share fellowship with all real Christians in this area. Secondly Scripture makes it clear that we separate ourselves from all evil doers." Well that put me in my place didn't it?

Let me give you alternative views. If unity means holding the same views and worshipping in the same way it will never happen and it will be a disaster if it did. The diversity of the Church is what gives it vitality. The story is told of a Cannibal king who was asked how he found life now compared with when he was young. "It's not like it was," he said. "Now with the ecumenical movement all the missionaries taste the same".

Unity is not about reducing diversity but celebrating it. You may know that at one time it was proposed to close SBC and Trinity and for the three of us to unite at Saint Nicholas as one congregation. Rather oddly it was St Nicholas who voted no. Had I had been here at the time I should have voted for that myself. Now I think I'm glad they never did unite our three churches. Suppose there was one united church here in the centre. Do you think more people would come to it than to the 3 churches that now exist? I now believe If you reduce the variety of congregations you reduce the diversity of worship therefore you limit the range of people who could find a Christian body with which they could identify. Sometimes there will be good reasons why particular denominations should unite. Quite frequently merging local churches will be sensible. But unity is not about accepting diversity not reducing it.

As for the idea of Christians ever believing the same – this is as impractical as it is undesirable. There have always been different perspectives on the truth and because the truth is always bigger than any of us there need to be. Controversy and debate are part of what keep the church alive.

Unity is not about ending diversity. Unity is celebrating diversity - accepting as fully Christians those who take a different view from us. The bottom line is this - Jesus was not a Methodist, not a Congregationalist, not a Presbyterian, not a Baptist, not an Anglican, not a Catholic. And therefore whatever our denomination is of utterly secondary importance compared to the fact that we all share his spirit and own him as lord.

And then thirdly unity is not for the church alone it is there for the world. Sometimes people think the word ecumenical means Christian unity. Actually in the Bible the word *oikoumene* means the inhabited earth, or the whole world. So the ecumenical movement is not just about the Church but about uniting the whole world, all people.

In a sentence heavy with meaning the Gospel of John declares that Jesus died "not for the nation alone, but to gather together the scattered children of God".

In a world divided between religions, races, political opinions and where we hard to live together our task is not to look for united churches but “bringing together the scattered children of God”.

So let’s rejoice in the unity we share, let’s deepen it, let’s celebrate our diversity, and then together lets look for a unity that will include all of humankind.

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