

Sermon for 24 January 2021

St Andrew's, Newgate Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, Diocese of Newcastle

Epiphany 3 / Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Revelation 19: 6-10, John 2: 1-11

Whither ecumenical relations today? Some reflections.

Revelation 19: 6-10 New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised (NRSVA)

⁶Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunder-peals, crying out,

‘Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.

⁷Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,

for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;

⁸to her it has been granted to be clothed
with fine linen, bright and pure’— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

⁹And the angel said^[a] to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’ And he said to me, ‘These are true words of God.’ ¹⁰Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, ‘You must not do that! I am a fellow-servant^[b] with you and your comrades^[c] who hold the testimony of Jesus.^[d] Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus^[e] is the spirit of prophecy.’

John 2: 1-11 New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised (NRSVA)

²On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there.

²Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ ⁴And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’ ⁵His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ ⁶Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸He said to them, ‘Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.’ So they took it. ⁹When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom ¹⁰and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. **But you have kept the good wine until now.**’ ¹¹Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

May my words and my meditation of our hearts be acceptable to the Lord, our strength, and our redeemer, Amen.

It is important to acknowledge that seeking the unity as Jesus had prayed for [may they be one so that the world might believe] before the final stages of his earthly ministry is always fraught with difficulties and issues. It is never easy when personalities [read: right ‘chemistry’] and relationships are key to ‘success’! How one measures ‘success’ in ecumenical relations naturally depends on the locality and its specific community context.

Many of you would know that for the past ten years, I have been working for the Northern Synod of the United Reformed Church. My geographical remit besides the urban conurbation of Tyne & Wear includes Berwick-upon-Tweed to the north, Kielder and Falstone to the West, and Northallerton in the south of the region. My initial role of Ecumenical Officer was later augmented by an inter-faith brief, something that has been close to my heart for several decades. I thought I might take this opportunity to share some of my reflections, given that we are in the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (18-25 January).

May I begin with a bit of history. 2012 was an important year for the United Reformed Church and not just for its 40th anniversary. It was also the 350th anniversary of the Great Ejection/ment, a tragedy in history that we hardly hear about, especially for us who are communicant members of the Church of England. Those 2,000 or so ministers who, on theological grounds, could not accept the requirements of the Act of Uniformity of 1662 were forced to leave the church, suffering severe hardship when they lost their livings. The critical point was St Bartholomew’s Day (24 August) in that same year.

Among many members of the URC, of both Congregational and Presbyterian backgrounds (perhaps, Churches of Christ too) that hurtful memory is ocean-deep! And, as Anglicans we do well to begin with some serious introspection!

It is rather ironic (if not paradoxical) that being Anglican working for the URC, I am licensed with a parish church that has the BCP as its main staple!

While I consider it a privilege to be involved quite intimately with a church with a strong Dissenting Tradition, and for someone familiar with hierarchical structures (some might even think that the hierarchical Church of England with all its faults and shortcomings is God’s gift to the world!), the URC has been a

good levelling influence on me. No Area/Rural Deans, Archdeacons and Bishops!!

Yet, the URC has key matters, possibly unresolved or un-resolvable, like being ‘conciliar’ and over-use of the term ‘mission’, the latter of which the Church of England is fashionably catching on.

Back to some history! On 7 February 2012, it was an honour to be present at a Service of Healing and Reconciliation, at times billed as a service for the healing of memories. Westminster Abbey was packed with the ‘great and the good’, bishops, priests, URC ministers, lots of lay people, and plebs like me. I was seated with my URC colleagues from various synods and not far from the high altar, from my position I could see many bishops on the opposite pews, looking solemn and tired, perhaps wearied by the General Synod debate (on women bishops especially) that had just taken place that same afternoon!

But what struck me most during that evening service in Westminster Abbey was the bishops’ apparently blasé attitude. You can tell by their body language: oh, just another service to attend after a long hard day at General Synod. Was there any energy left for ecumenism, at best a hobby among Anglicans?! Psychological barriers do linger.

What was particularly telling was that though the service was well put together, with all the right words being said, with almost equal participation from both the CoE and the URC, with an appropriately erudite sermon from Archbishop Rowan Williams, there seemed very little repentance at the end.

Naturally, I could be completely mistaken in my perception. I am sure some were most enthusiastic about the service, including the two archbishops of Canterbury and York. But we know that institutional remorse is a rare virtue!

That experience of being in Westminster Abbey has informed my own sense of unworthiness of being an Anglican and should alter the way I view the prayer of penitence each time I say it! What has the church that I am closely affiliated with, done to our Non-Conformist/Dissenting sisters and brothers? Should I continue to feel embarrassed today for what happened in the 17th century? Where is true repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation to be found?

It made me wonder if there is not a kind of ‘parallel universe’ here? What is significant for the URC [to borrow an OT imagery: a church of David’s size] is at best marginal for the ‘Goliath’ Church of England? It is as if the two

‘realities’ do not meet! Would we ever come to the point where we will truly acknowledge the hurt that the Established Church has caused to our Non-Conformist and Dissenting sisters and brothers? Patience might be a necessary virtue till the 400th anniversary of the Great Ejection.

After I shared this personal story at an Anglican holy communion service a few years ago, a visiting professor from Glasgow, based at Newcastle University, who was among the congregation, reminded me after the service that the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) is the ‘big brother’ in Scotland in relation to the Episcopal Church of which he is a member! So, a reverse power dynamic to that of England!

From history to some philosophy. The French philosopher of religion, Paul Ricoeur, in his magisterial work, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (ET, 2004) ends with some very difficult notions about forgiveness. For Ricoeur, history must expand collective memory beyond the actual memory of individuals, and correct, or even refute, the memory of a determined community, which envelops itself in its own past sufferings so that it becomes blind to the sufferings of other communities.

It should also serve as a warning for many Non-Conformists who may not even know about the suffering of Church of England clergy, who had lost their livings in the 17th century. Ricoeur continues: “*It is along the path of critical history that memory encounters the sense of justice. What would a happy memory be that was not an equitable memory?*” (p.500)

What does or could “equitable” mean for our ecumenical contexts? Can we go beyond imagining such a concept and help bring it closer to reality? Can we have memory without justice?

Let us now turn to 15 November 2014: to the Ecumenical Service in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*. Central to the work of the Council, this was the decree that changed the relationship of other churches with the Roman Catholic Church, both in this country and around the world.

Members, leaders, and representatives of all the churches in the North East participated with our Catholic sisters and brothers in a moving service held at St Mary's Cathedral in Newcastle led by Bishop Seamus Cunningham. There were opportunities not only for much prayer and praise, but reflections on ecumenical journeying in the past 50 years interspersed with much humour and significantly, penitence.

Revd John Durell, a retired and much-esteemed URC minister, and my immediate predecessor, spoke during the service about how:

Over the past 50 years the world has seen walls built and walls demolished. The joy expressed when barriers fall, as in Berlin just 25 [almost 32 now] years ago, and the agony when they are strengthened and enlarged, as continues today in the Holy Land [just as I had witnessed for 3 months five years ago] make the significance of this ecumenical venture in which we are all engaged clear enough. And let us be clear, too, that the barriers that were there between us just fifty years ago were not erected all from one side.

*When we hear claims nowadays that we are in an **ecumenical winter** again, we need to recognise how far we have come. It was so much colder back then. But if we are to press forward and move beyond this or that impasse which careless actions and ill-judged pronouncements seem to erect from time to time, we need to take to heart the insight of the Decree which reminds us “There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without inner conversion”. We share this time of penitence, recognising that so much depends on us.*

The celebration service, with no sense of any Catholic triumphalism, was perhaps for me an instance of what ‘being ecumenical’ means (in our very being/getting embedded in our DNA), and not just doing things ‘ecumenically’ – a question that I have been grappling with for many years!

If indeed Jesus had prayed for his followers to be one, what sort of unity do we seek in the face of the continuing diversity of mainstream Christian denominations and the growth of ‘new’ churches founded on ethno-linguistic-cultural lines and nationalities? Is visible unity the same as physical unity, the latter being an almost an impossible goal?

Our identity, fundamentally, must be found in Christ and NOT in our differences, though that diversity of differences is itself enriching! Furthermore, we should always ask ourselves: what sort of Church would Jesus Christ want us to build to serve God and God’s people in the future? At the same time, looking for faithful and innovative ways of ‘being’ and ‘working’ together.

Our very familiar passage from the Fourth Gospel reminds us that the miracle during the wedding at Cana is the first of Jesus’ signs that will ultimately point to the revealing of his glory. In essence, God’s glory!

As St Augustine of Hippo [Early Church theologian] explains, this sign points forward to the eternal union of Christ with his Church. At Cana, Jesus does not

upstage the unnamed bridegroom. Only he, his disciples and the servants know that he has stepped into the groom's position as provider of the wine, representing beforehand what is to come. The 'marriage feast of the Lamb' as described in the Book of Revelation, where Christ is the bridegroom of the Church and provides the wine in the form of his own life blood. In this eternal feast, Christ brings God's creation to completion.

The miracle for us today is not turning water into wine, but how this same Church might be united to reflect the glory of God in Christ!

As a redeemed and purified people, described in that apocalyptic yet hopeful vision presented by John [not necessarily the same writer of the Fourth Gospel]:

'Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.

⁷ Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,

for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;

⁸ to her it has been granted to be clothed
with fine linen, bright and pure'— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

Let us pray:

*Lord God, whose son was content to die to bring new life,
have mercy on your church which will do anything you ask,
anything at all, except die and be reborn.*

*Lord Christ, forbid us unity which leaves us where we are and as we are:
welded into one company but extracted from the battle;
engaged to be yours, but not found at your side.*

*Holy Spirit of God, reach deeper than our inertia and fears:
release us into the freedom of children of God.*

(source: Ian M Fraser)

Amen.