

Epiphany 3 2012 – the Essence of Christian Unity

Genesis 14 vv 17-20 p15, Ps128, Revelation 19 vv 6-10 p1248, John 2 vv 1-11 p1064

I Corinthians 10^{16&17}: *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break is not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, one body; for we are all partakers of that one bread.*

The 18th – 25th of January is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity or more properly the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity because it lasts eight days, not seven. Last week we recalled times past when Christians fought wars over their differences or persecuted those whom they regarded as heretics. It is wrong to persecute atheists. It is wrong to persecute the people the Prayer Book refers to (with glorious political incorrectness) as *Jews, Turks, Infidels and Hereticks*. It is wrong because it is wrong to use violence against people and it is wrong because it is wrong to attempt to use force to change someone's mind how ever sure you are that that person's beliefs are wrong. God gave us the freedom to choose Him or to reject Him. We have no right to take away that freedom from other people. We should share our faith, commend our faith, educate our children in the faith, but to persecute someone for his or her political or religious beliefs, to persecute anyone for any kind of belief at all, is to take away his or her basic right to an opinion and it is to risk missing the chance to learn something. How often in history have the persecutors turned out to be wrong and the persecuted individual or minority has turned out to be right after all? Christians were once a persecuted minority in the Roman Empire. Those who believed in an English Bible and an English Prayer Book were once a minority in Mediaeval Christendom. Navigators who believed that the earth was round rather than flat were in the minority until Columbus sailed to America, as once were astronomers who believed that the sun rather than the earth was at the centre of the solar system. Campaigners for democracy in general and votes for women in particular were all in a minority in their own time but are now generally accepted to have been right all along. It is always wrong to use force to suppress belief both because you may be wrong and because even if the other guy is wrong he still has the right to hold his beliefs unmolested and to practise them if he can do so without harming others.

But wars between Christians, persecution carried out by one kind of Christian against another kind of Christian are worse still. Our common humanity ought to determine the way we treat other human beings. It ought to hold us back from cruelty, greed and selfishness. It ought to inspire generosity and kindness to one another. But what we are as Christians ought to bind us even more firmly than we are bound simply by being human. This is perhaps why S Paul says: *While we have time, let us do good unto all men; and specially unto them that are of the household of faith.* (Galatians 6¹⁰.)

In this country, thank God, the days of Christians actively persecuting Christians are long gone, but we may forget just how much progress has been made in the last fifty or so years. When I was young, quite a lot of people were doubtful about whether members of other churches were proper Christians at all. Some still are doubtful. In the last 100 years or so, scholarly commissions have reconsidered the doctrinal differences between the churches. Quite often we've found that when we look for what we have in common instead of for what divides us we are closer than we thought. Some of the supposed differences between the churches turn out to be misunderstandings. There are still genuine areas of disagreement

between the churches, but these days we tend to keep talking and respect one another's integrity and sincerity, rather than walking out of the talks and turning our backs on one another. There are of course possible new causes of division in the debates about the ordination of women and homosexuality, but it is to be hoped that Christians who hold different beliefs concerning these and other issues will continue in fellowship with one another. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would lead us into all truth. We are learning to be patient while we wait for the Truth to dawn and, in the meantime, to continue in love and charity with those Christians whose ideas of what the Truth will turn out to be differ from our own.

Also in the last fifty years or so, we've been more willing to work together as churches, sharing buildings, working together on bible translations and liturgies and engaging in social action and mission. We might be willing to explore how we can cooperate with other churches to maintain a presence in communities where we are all struggling. If, in a village, there are 20 practising Anglicans, 3 Roman Catholics and a couple of dozen assorted non-conformists, do we need to maintain more than one church building and to bring in ministers from outside to minister to each denomination? I don't know the answer to that question, by the way.

Fifty years ago many people believed that the movement towards Church Unity, what we call the ecumenical movement, would lead to denominations merging, to reunions between Methodists and Anglicans, Anglicans and other non-conformists, various non-conformist bodies merging, and eventually all of us joining with the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox. Progress here has been much slower. This may not be entirely a bad thing. I believe that we reach more people by having two churches in both Cuxton and Halling. I believe that Anglicans and members of the United Reformed Church and Baptists all have different and valuable contributions to make to the life of the Catholic Church in this parish. To be honest, I think if we were to merge at this stage, the other churches would be swallowed up in ours just because we've got the best buildings and can still just about afford a full time minister. We should have lost the distinctive contribution made by Baptist and URC and we should have contracted our over all mission to the parish.

The essence of Christian Unity is not, however, doctrinal agreement, liturgical conformity, shared buildings and facilities, cooperating in mission and social action or organisational merger. The essence of Christian Unity is love. God is love. The essence of Christian Unity is God. Get God right, get love right, and the rest would follow. If we loved as we are loved, we should be worshipping together in spirit and in truth and working together for that great day when the kingdoms of this world shall become the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ. It is sin that creates division. Sin alienates us from God and sin alienates us from one another. That is why, as S Paul says, *The wages of sin is death*. However *So God loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life*. God breaks the vicious circle of alienation. He sends His Son into the world to bring us back, to set us free. In Him we are born again. He brings life in all its fulness, joy in abundance. When Jesus washes our sins away, He breaks down the wall dividing us from God. We are made one with Him, one with God in Christ Jesus. We

are baptised into Christ. The relationship between God and the believer, Christ and the Church is love. It is just like marriage. The two become one because they are one in love. So we are united with Christ in love. We are united with God the Father in love. We are united with the Spirit in love. We are adopted as His children when we come to Him in faith and are baptised in His Name, Christ in us and we in Him.

Christians disagree about whether marriage should be called a Sacrament (It depends what you mean by *Sacrament*.) but in marriage a couple make unconditional, lifelong vows and they become one flesh. God makes them man and wife. They then live out their married life together. They look after one another. They work together. They play together. They exchange tokens and signs of affection. They grow together. Being only human, they sometimes fail altogether, but it is tragic when they do. It is not meant to happen. Having become one at their wedding, they are meant to grow in love throughout their lives.

Baptism certainly is a Sacrament. In it we are made one with Christ. We make certain vows about what we believe and how we intend to live. We are one with Christ in Baptism and in a healthy Christian life we grow in Him, we grow into Him. By prayer and meditation on the Bible, in the fellowship of the Church, and especially through the other great Gospel Sacrament of Holy Communion our communion and fellowship with Him are deepened. *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break is not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, one body; for we are all partakers of that one bread.* God is one. So, if I am one with God in Christ and you are one with God in Christ, then you and I are one with one another. And that is the essence of Christian Unity. Since Christians are one with God in love, it follows that all Christians are one with one another in love. There can only be one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, because the Church is the Body of Christ and Christ is one. Essentially the Church is one – *the whole state of Christ's Church militant here in earth*, which means all Christians everywhere in this world, and the Church in Heaven. This is the communion of saints, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Our unity with God in Christ, our unity with one another in Christ, is demonstrated and deepened when we participate together in this meal in which Bread and Wine become for us the Body and Blood of Christ.

And this is why Christian disunity is a scandal. Christian disunity is a denial both of Baptism and of Holy Communion, the Gospel Sacraments. It is a drastic failure to live up to our calling, a denial of what we are as the people of God. Doctrinal agreement, shared worship, missionary cooperation all follow from Christian Unity, but they are not its essence. The essence of Christian Unity is the love of God, His love for us and our love for Him which, as St John tells us, cannot be genuine unless we love one another. *We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.* That's why it is more scandalous when Christians fail to love one another than when human beings in general fail to love one another. We Christians are the children of God Who is love. But, of course, all human beings were created as children of God and all human beings are potentially children of God if they repent and turn to Christ. So all human beings ought to live in love and the unity which the Church is called to embody is a sign of the ultimate unity of the whole creation.