

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

18-25 January 2010

Sermon preached in St. Anne's Cathedral Belfast, 19 January 2010 and St. Patrick's Cathedral, Armagh, 20 January 2010 during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity by Rt. Rev. Malcolm McMahon OP, Bishop of Nottingham

'You are witnesses to these things' Luke 24:48

Well, is ecumenism becalmed? Some would say it is 'dead in the water'. We have gone as far as possible - albeit a long way. Last century the journey took us from conflict to conversation, from conversation to cooperation, from cooperation to commitment. All these are 'together' words. But, of course, one word is missing, and that is communion.

The theme we are offered in this week reminds me very much of the words of St John who, at the beginning of his first letter, wants to tell us what he has seen and heard so that we may have communion, not just with each other but with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ.

So it is obvious to me that ecumenism is far from being 'dead in the water'. We cannot sit back on our laurels and say this is as good as it gets. That is patently not true because there is still that big and final step to take – undoubtedly the hardest – from commitment to communion.

If we are to be effective witnesses we have to pass on to others that which we have seen and heard, not only that which has been passed on to us. In other words witnessing is a two stage process. First we have to see, hear or touch something that remains with us in our experience and our memory, and then secondly we testify to the truth of that which we experienced.

Now that simple two-stage process is very hard for Catholics. Catholics experience the immediacy and nearness of God through the Church, the tradition and in particular the Sacraments. So what is it that they have seen and heard that they can testify to so that we may have communion?

In the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission, which I was privileged to be part of for the last document: *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, a particular method is used to explore the questions before us and seek agreement. And that is to go back in time to the ancient common tradition which most Christians shared. This theological quest to find a common basis in the ancient councils and the fathers of the church provides a firm foundation to explore each other's beliefs as they were formed and lived out in worship and liturgy. This method produces for the theologians a remarkable degree of understanding. But the documents meet a great deal of opposition from both sides when they are published. And it strikes me that perhaps we didn't go back far enough in our quest for a common starting point. We should go back further to try to reach a common understanding of God. What a task!



Catholics' understanding of the way God remains hidden but present in our lives gives rise to a system of Sacraments which are guaranteed by the promise of Jesus to be present to us when we are gathered in his name, and by his words that he will remain with us to the end of time. Whilst this is very understandable to people who have been brought up in this system of belief it can be quite strange and seem almost magical to those were not. But believing that God's action in the world can be revealed through human actions and acts of nature speaks to us of a God who is very close and whose power we witness everyday. We don't always have to rely on the words of others to witness to God in our lives.

Our personal perception, understanding and relationship with God, our Father and Creator is so important when Christians come together to work together, talk, or to worship and to give praise to God. How clear are we that we share a common understanding of God? It is true to say that every individual Christian has their own relationship with God. But some images of God we hold in our hearts are not always the full story about God, or helpful to our spiritual life.

Let me offer to you what I have seen and heard so that we may have communion.

When I was a young child my mother occasionally brought me to the Catholic Church in Somerstown which was the church she attended when she grew up. Above the High Altar in St. Aloysius', that was the name of the church, was large triangle with an eye at its centre – the eye of God. It was all watching, all seeing, situated above and beyond us. This was the way we were often taught about God. The triangle somehow explains the Trinity; three sides yet one figure. But its main purpose as an image of God was to keep us all in our place, on best behaviour, not daring to step out of line because this God saw not just our actions but into our hearts as well. This image of God is only partly true. It doesn't show how God is involved with us in a very intimate and personal way.

Yet this is one of the most popular ways in which God is perceived by people of many religions - as a superior being who is to be feared and who moves human beings around like pawns on a chess board. He is a God who is a long way from us and judges us harshly. Despite his power, he is a limited and rather small god. But, nevertheless, quite popular!

Now let me present to you another experience of God. This experience is shared with the people of Haiti at this moment. About 18 years ago I went to visit one of our Dominican priests in Jamaica. He was in the Eastern end of the country in Morant Bay, working with some Belgian Sisters trying to rebuild a church that had been blown down in a hurricane, Gilbert I think was called. As well as putting the building back together, he was also helping the people rebuild their community. This was especially true amongst the poorest of the poor. For the first time in my life I met people who had nothing: no shelter except a sheet or two of corrugated iron, no possessions, no homes, no hope. As part of their work, the Belgian sisters gave these people the Scriptures. What a waste of time, you might say. Surely some food, clothing money or whatever would be a better gift. Well, the sisters did share what they had but it didn't go far. The Word of God in the Scriptures was shared amongst the people who met in groups in a little clearing in their shanty town. The Scriptures showed them that God loved them and valued them, that these people who were not much different in most peoples' eyes from the rubbish they lived off in the town dumps were actually worth something, worth dying for. They mattered to God, to each other and to themselves. With this gift of God they were able to work together as a community, set up shop to buy things in larger quantities, they were able to plant corn together and build somewhere to meet, to read the Scriptures and to pray, they built little houses which became homes. It all started with the Word of God. It was redemption in action, mind-blowing and moving.

The God of these people was not a distant God handing out harsh judgments but a God who shows his love visibly on a daily basis. We have probably insulated ourselves from feeling the action of God in lives – if so how can we expect to find him in the Scriptures and in the Sacraments. How can we give witness to something that we haven't seen or heard? It doesn't make sense to us. But God does make sense to those who are near to him, those who are stripped of the trappings of this world. The hidden God shows himself in many ways. Is this a God we would recognise, with the burden of our churches weighing heavily on our shoulders?

One Easter I was standing in a gas chamber in Auschwitz, looking at the trolleys that took the bodies of the mainly Jewish victims to the incinerators. I felt that something was missing – at first I thought of the obvious, there were no bodies, after all they had all been burnt. There were plenty of signs of death. One display case was full of children's shoes, another full of human hair, yet another showed the opened and empty cans of Cylcon B, the agent which produced the deathly gas. But no bodies. Being Easter, thought of the empty tomb and of how the women and the disciples felt when they discovered that all their hopes amounted to nothing. I felt shocked. Then I realised that for the first time in my life I had really experienced the absence of God. God was present to me by his absence. This was really a most terrifying moment, but one which deepened my own understanding of our God. Where was God throughout the Holocaust? Jonathan Sacks the Chief Rabbi asks where was humanity. As Christians, we say God was in the gas chambers, on the trolleys being pushed into the incinerators. He was in the heaps of hair and discarded human possessions. God wasn't up on the wall looking down on his people in their moment of need with one eye through a triangle. He was with them in their suffering, in their pain and desolation. He had exchanged the cross for the gas chamber.

In offering you these three experiences of God, you, too, may find a God who is there for you in all your moments. When we talk of God as Trinity we can talk of God's life and how the Father Son and Spirit relate to each other. St. John Damascene said their relationship was like an eternal dance, a kind of heavenly three hand reel. St. Augustine tells us that the Son is the expression of the Father in word and flesh, and the sort is the love of one for the other. But to be honest, unless that has some bearing on you and me, it doesn't really matter what goes on in God's life. We are not like an ancient people dodging the fallout from the anger of the Gods. If they got angry with each other it was expressed as thunder and lightning, or if one is heartbroken in love his tears flooded the earth. No, our God has a purpose for us, and has made us a nation, but in sending his Son Jesus to us, his love made visible for us, St. Paul says, then he has made each one of us matter to him.

If we are to be witnesses to these things, we should have the courage to remove the dark from our eyes, open them wide and see more clearly the God who is doing marvellous things in our midst. That is what we are committed to do as Christians seeking unity, so that we may tell others what we have seen and heard, to bring about that communion which is much desired by our Lord.

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