

## Unity in Christ - Reverend Hans Christiansen – Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> May 2009

**Reading: Jn 17.6-19 “That they may all become one as we are one”**

Today marks the beginning in the southern hemisphere of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity lasting until the Eve of Pentecost next Saturday. United with Churches from all denominations we gather in prayer each day this week to pray with and for each other and to pray for further visible unity to manifest between our Churches.

That's why we today have the magnificent text from John 17 where Jesus, the night before he dies, prays for the disciples with the magnificent prayer:

*...that they may be one as we are one.*

Final words of any human being are often intense. When we are at the end of life we need to say what is and has been important to us. There is no more time for platitudes and shallow words. You might have been fortunate enough to sit with a dying parent or loved one and have been graced with some of the final words of the dying person.

Having taught his disciples to love one another and having shown unconditional love in words and actions and finally washed his disciples feet, he stops. All has been said. There is no more room for words, only prayer and contemplation, and his prayer is beautiful and intense and very important.

What does he pray? He prays for his disciples that

*they may become one as he and the Father are totally one.*

To be one with God and with each other is our birthright. When we are not one with God and with each other we are in pain. That is one of the meanings of the myth in the Bible and of the fall from paradise. When Adam and Eve, the human archetypes, eat the apple of knowledge they 'fall', so to speak, from a simple harmonious existence where they are completely one with themselves, with each other, with God, and with their environment into fragmented and separate persons who suddenly are embarrassed by themselves, symbolised by the need to cover their genitals and hide from God.

Like Adam and Eve, when we grow up, we too fall into separateness, to ego, to fragmentation. That is our original sin, which we all are destined to live with but ultimately transcend, just as Christ did. We are all meant to find our way back into the innocence, simplicity and oneness with ourselves and with each other in the Paradise Garden.

Hence Jesus' last prayer is for us to find our way back into that unity which he himself lived in. But the return back to the unity of the garden, as we all know, is narrow, and the angel stands with the sword in front of the garden.

Our own Church history, the very history, which ought to have been a shining light in the world, is often a grave example of our separation from God and from each other. Especially painful are the splits in the 11<sup>th</sup> century between the Eastern and Western Church and in the 16<sup>th</sup> century between Catholic and Protestant Churches and the subsequent religious wars that followed these separations.

For those of us who care and who think that unity in Christ is of utmost importance, our separation is a painful thing. It is painful when we can't share the sacrament of Eucharist, which is supposed to be

a sign of unity with God and with one another. Not only is it painful for us, it also diminishes our witness to Christ's unconditional love for the world.

Mother Teresa once said that Mahatma Gandhi had said that if all the Christians living in India really lived Christ's message of love and unity, then all Indians would be Christians.

We all belong together and are knit together in one faith, one hope and one baptism, as it says in the letter to the Ephesians. It is too easy to spiritualise this too much, as some Church leaders do, and say that we always have unity in the spirit and therefore it doesn't matter if we share full Church unity. Full unity does matter, not only for our witness to the world but also for our own faith, which, without the gifts of the other denominations, is diminished and impoverished.

Reflecting on the metaphor of the body of Christ in relation to the importance of Christian Unity, Archbishop Rowan Williams writes:

*The body of Christ means more than co-operation. It is about a mutual creation. We constitute each other. What I do is essential to who you are in Christ; what you do is essential to who I am in Christ...When the Christian community is one, it is functioning inter-actively... Ecumenism is therefore...a reciprocal learning process. It is the exchange of gifts.*

Ecumenism is an exchange of gifts. What the Catholics do and think is important to me as an Anglican. What we do and think is important to them. Why? Because we are all part of each other and Christ is revealed in different ways through us, but only in parts. Ecumenism, the work for unity, is therefore not only something someone does, it is a way of discipleship within the body of Christ. It is a way of love and humbleness and ultimately self-emptying in the image of Christ himself who emptied himself from his unity with God in order to be fully one with fallen humanity.

We need to get to know each other and learn from each other so we can learn more about God's total love and self-revelation.

As Cardinal Mercier, one of the driving forces behind the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, wrote

*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.*

As we today begin a week of focused prayers for Christian Unity, we can celebrate how far we have come in our relationship with other Churches. Who would have dreamed 300 hundred years ago that Roman Catholics, Anglicans and other Protestants regularly would come together and pray together? Who would have dreamed that monastic houses like Taize in France, Bosse in Italy, Camaldoli in U.S.A would break the chains of separation and invite women and men from different denominations to live together and share the Eucharist together daily?

Indeed we have come far also in our local area. Recently in Holy Week we had prayer services here in this Church with 20 people from the local Catholic Church and recently 5 people from the local Catholic church came spontaneously to our Taize service. We are building friendships and furthering the ground for full unity to happen.

But there is so much more to do. We need to continually get closer to each other and make friends with each other. It is already happening, but we can be more active. If there ever is to be full union it must come from the ground; from local parishes and groups; studying the scriptures together and praying together and sharing together.

Unity is our birth and baptism right. First and foremost a return to the garden and union with God and then secondly union with one another.

We cannot rest as Christians as long as we are not in union with one another, for our disunity it is not only an institutional fragmentation it is a sign of our own inner fragmentation as well. As long as we are not in full union with one another we cannot fully radiate Christ to the world.

So Christ continues to pray: *that they may be one as we are one*

The prayer that Christ prayed in the Upper Room the night before he dies is still heard. Christ prays ceaselessly for and through the church to the world -- *that they may be one, as we are one*. So let us join our prayers to his today and throughout this week and together pray for unity between all Christians so that we together may be united once again in a spirit of love and compassion.

Amen.

Hans Christiansen