

St John's, Bath, January 19th 2008: Christian Unity Octave

Homily by Fr Nick King

Two nights ago, a student of mine, in the course of a conversation in which he was trying, perhaps with increasing desperation, to defend his view that there is not and cannot possibly be a God, made a familiar move. He said “there are so many religions, and so many sects within Christianity – they can't all be true”. He was floundering around at this point, I felt, but he has a point, doesn't he? Our disunion is a reason for people not to believe the gospel that we proclaim. And yet for at least 100 years we have been praying for an end to the scandal of disunity. In the case of my own church, sadly, it is rather less than 40 years that we have officially joined in these prayers, perhaps because of a sense that it was not we who created the scandal. That is not true, of course; all of us have contributed in our different ways to the wounding of the Body of Christ. Even those tedious jokes about an Anglican vicar, a Methodist minister and a Catholic priest play their part in creating an atmosphere in which we each of us unconsciously think, “our lot is better than their lot”, like the supporters of different football teams.

So what, we may ask, is God up to, given that we have been praying for 100 years this year for the unity of Christians? Actually, concern about disunity goes back a great deal further than just one century. Even in the NT church there are clear signs of tension and division; and, led by Jesus himself, people have been praying for the unity of the Body of Christ, ever since that time. A helpful insight was offered me by a wise old Jesuit priest, when I was, perhaps rather petulantly, complaining to him once about how God had not seemed to answer my prayers with regard to a

particularly difficult and painful situation. He paused, and then said, “God is good – slow, mind you – but real good”. God acts slowly and patiently to repair the damage caused by our sin. An example of that might be our recent belated but suddenly quite clear awareness that our selfish patterns of life are destroying the planet on which God has placed us. God is at work quietly and slowly to undo the damage that we have done but it is at God’s pace, not ours. We are always impatient for instant results. You all know the story of the person who was walking through the woods and saw a butterfly struggling to emerge from the chrysalis, and, fearful that it might be eaten by a bird, warmed the caterpillar to speed the process. The butterfly duly emerged, but because the process had been too rapid, its wings had not grown, and it could not fly. We have to be content with God’s speed, not ours. And that is true of our endeavours to pray for the reunification of Christians.

What then does prayer do, and why is our slogan for this year’s Christian Unity Octave, and for today’s service, “pray without ceasing”? Does praying do any good? A crude way of looking at prayer, that we fall into perhaps a bit too easily is “it does something to God”. A safer way of talking about it is, “It does something to us”. God does not change, of course; but God certainly responds every time we turn to him in love. If you wrote to Father Christmas in 2007; if your children, a month ago, were making it clear to you what they wanted for Christmas, that has an effect: asking someone for something establishes or deepens a relationship. Much more important, however, is what prayer does to us. How does it do that? Well, for a start, you have to remember to let God get a word in edgeways. Once we have done our asking, for the safety of the planet, or for the reunion of Christ’s church, then we have to listen for the response. How does that response come? On the whole, not with a

fanfare of trumpets and the presence of the Archangel Gabriel; on the whole, it comes through a whisper in the silence, an apparent coincidence, an unexpected conversation later in the same day, whose significance only dawned on us because we had had that period of listening out for the voice of God. And if we think that we already know the answer to the question “how is the Body of Christ to be reunited?”, then that means that we are not in a place where we can listen to what the Spirit of God might be saying to us.

What, then, will it look like when we are finally reunited? We have no idea; only that Spirit of God can tell us that. It seems impossible, doesn't it? And so does a sensible approach to what we have done to the environment, for that matter, but that should not stop us working towards these praiseworthy objectives. So when you look at the difficulties for ecumenism, Christians of the Reformed tradition, for quite sensible reasons, rooted in their reading of the NT, insist on sola fide, sola Scriptura, sola gratia. Christians of the Catholic tradition, for quite sensible reasons, rooted in two millennia of experience in the attempt to live out the gospel, insist on membership of the community that Jesus founded, and tend to regard all other Christian movements as breakaways? How can any amount of prayer bridge that gap?

Well, I don't know the answer to that question, for I am not God; but God knows. And let me share with you one experience from my time in South Africa. Under apartheid, many Christians found themselves in prison, often tortured, often in solitary confinement. There, even in solitary confinement, because human nature and the Holy Spirit are more ingenious than the forces of darkness, they encountered other Christians from different traditions, who were also in prison because they were

Christian and therefore opposed to apartheid. They discovered that they sang the same hymns, or they swiftly taught each other new hymns, and they learnt that they were able to pray together to survive what they were enduring and to pray for an end to apartheid. What happened to them was that the Spirit taught them a) how much they had in common and b) that God can do the impossible. It really did not seem possible, in those days, that apartheid should ever come to an end. But it has.

And that discovery, that they had important things in common, and that the Spirit was working wonders among them, can be handy for us today. It is really important for us to insist on what unites us; and it is not always easy to do so. My mother was, some 40 years ago, appointed to the Christian Unity commission, and she checked out with the bishop what the official line was with regard to certain practices. Could she, for example, attend services in a non-Catholic church? He was reluctant, but was forced to agree that one could go to the funeral of an old friend. “But you can’t join in the prayers or sing the hymns”. My mother argued, however, that she sang those same hymns in her bath, so why could she not sing them in church, and join in the Lord’s Prayer, which Jesus taught us. To his undying credit, the bishop chuckled and admitted defeat; but it shows where we were, only a generation ago, and how far we have moved, despite what we sometimes think.

The fact is that we do share the Lord’s Prayer, and therefore Jesus’ profound sense that God is our father, and therefore Jesus’ profound sense that we are all brothers and sisters, even if, as in all families, we disagree from time to time.

We believe, too, in the incarnation, the astonishing claim that God became one of us, and how that transformed our entire existence. More startling yet, we believe that when Jesus was killed by the forces ranged against God, God was not defeated, but raised Jesus from the dead. We believe that the Word of God is unfailingly offered to us, in scripture and in the breaking of the bread. We believe in the equality of all human beings, and that they are created in God's image and likeness. And we believe that the Holy Spirit is gently and powerfully at work in our lives.

So we have the main things in common, and that means that we can listen to the valued insights of our fellow-Christians, without in any way surrendering our own. One example that may have occurred to you arises from the fact that we are living in a world that regards religious people not merely as odd or crazy, but positively dangerous. So Catholics and evangelicals, for example, find themselves in the same corner when it comes to dealing with the work of Professor Richard Dawkins; those who are opposed to us teach us how much we share. I teach a good many students from Wycliffe College in Oxford, and we discover that we have a great deal in common, possibly to the surprise of both parties. The same thing happened to me when I was working in South Africa. When I first went there, and encountered dominies (ministers) of the Dutch Reformed Church, I was aware of immense suspicion on their part, for a variety of reasons, of what they were accustomed to describe to themselves as the "Romse gevaar", the "Roman danger". By the time I left, 12 years later I was aware that, again for a variety of reasons, there had been a huge sea-change in their attitudes. In particular, they found that they had warmed to Catholic notions of spirituality and of sacramentality, very much to their own surprise, I think, and entirely to mine.

We have then much to be grateful for, and strong reasons for confidence, not in what *we* are achieving in our Christian journey, for it does not work quite like that, but in what God is doing in the world and in the churches. I should like to end, where perhaps you will feel I should have begun, with some reflections on the reading that you have chosen for today and for this week. It comes at the very end of 1 Thessalonians, which is almost certainly the earliest of Paul's surviving letters, and therefore the earliest document of the entire NT. That alone would give it a claim on our attention, of course.

In the letter so far, written to that church in Thessalonica, up at the top end of Greece, one of the first that Paul founded once he had crossed over into Europe, a church of which he was enormously fond, Paul has reminded his hearers of what it was like when he was with them, and the powerful experience of the Spirit that they had together undergone. He has recalled to them how he behaved when he was there, and expresses his gratitude for the fact that they were able to recognise God's speech to them. He also reminds them that he had warned them about the likelihood of persecution, and that persecution was indeed what happened (which may be something that we should take aboard). He has also warned them about two things in particular, that they should avoid sexual sin, living as they did in a society where it was rife; and that they should live at peace with others. He also reaffirms belief in the Resurrection; it seems that some of the Christians at Thessalonica had died, and people were panicking that perhaps this meant they would not have a share in the Resurrection. He reminds them that Jesus will return, and urges on them the importance of paying attention to church leaders. Then comes our passage: it is all about how they are to live out their Christian vocation: "be at peace among yourselves". Which is not a bad motto. Then there is

some advice about how to deal with various categories of Christians, “the disorderly”, “the fainthearted”, “the sick”. There is a timely warning to be patient, and not to “repay evil with evil” (fun though it undoubtedly is to be able to say “I’m going to get them!”). And above all (and what better advertisement could there be for our way of life?) “rejoice at all times”, and, our slogan for this week, “pray without ceasing”. That is essential, and without this unceasing prayer, we shall not be able to discern what the Lord is inviting us to.

There are two other phrases in the verses following our reading, which I should like to share with you, for they seem important. The first is, “in all things be grateful”. The older I get, the more it seems to me that gratitude is one of the most profoundly important spiritual attitudes, and one that sets us free to follow the uncharted journey on which the Spirit is leading us.

The second is, “do not extinguish the Spirit”. The word he uses is one for putting out the fire. Now fires are inconvenient and destructive things, it is true; but the Spirit appeared in the form of tongues of fire at Pentecost, and the Spirit can be inconvenient and destructive of things we thought we held dear. So this week, and for the rest of our lives, let us retain this Spirit-filled gratitude, and not put out the fire. That means, of course, that we must, we simply must, “pray without ceasing”.