

Unity and diversity

Ephesians 4.1-16

There is a fascinating paradox in today's reading from Ephesians. The writer calls for unity, and then goes on to talk about diversity. We should be aware that his call for unity 'Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' carries in the Greek a really urgent tone – it really really matters that his readers get this right. He was writing to people who were facing divisions within the church. It was clearly a common problem in the early years of Christianity – Paul says to the Corinthian Christians 'Each of you says "I belong to Paul" or "I belong to Apollos" or "I belong to Cephas" or "I belong to Christ"'. Has Christ been divided?' He returns to that again a couple of chapters later. So when we see today's church divisions, whilst we can't be happy about them, at least we know there's nothing new, and we still need to give it urgent attention Ephesians asks for.

Let me illustrate the tendency we have to divide with what was voted the best religious joke of all time, and a favourite of mine. It was written by a man called Emo Phillips about 35 years ago. (the old ones are the best!) It goes like this:

'Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!" Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.'

I have little time for the kind of ecumenism which says we all have to belong to the same church. That has been the besetting sin of some attitudes to unity over the years – ultimately saying that unity is when everyone comes back and is part of us. That *would* be unity, but not, I believe as Jesus envisaged it when he prayed 'that the may all be one'.

Unity which means something happens when people not only mentally acknowledge, but live out a belief that what unites us is infinitely more important than what divides us. When I was a Vicar in

Manchester at one Week of Prayer for Unity Week I asked all the Manchester United supporters to come to one side of the front of the church, the City supporters to go to the other, and all the supporters of odd teams like Chelsea or Liverpool to go to the back. That left the people who didn't support any team in the middle. Suddenly what divided all those supporters ceased to be important. They were the football fans, as opposed to those who couldn't care less about football. It is when we see that essential unity in Christ as the important thing that we see our joint mission to those who couldn't care less. What denomination people belong to is irrelevant. We are all part of the one universal (Catholic) church. As Archbishop Michael Ramsey once said at a meeting I was at in Cambridge when two great missionary societies united to form USPG 'I don't want the whole world to become Anglican – I should feel very sorry for them if they did.'

What unity which is not concerned with being clones offers to us is a parallel to all those things we heard in the Epistle to the Ephesians. There were Christians within the church there – we know also at Corinth - who wanted everyone to be the same. So he uses this powerful imagery of the human body – 'there is one body and one Spirit'. In the first letter to the Corinthians Paul expands that idea saying that we need all our different bits and pieces. The body wouldn't be able to function if we all wanted to be the same. The strength comes not only from the unity of being part of the same whole, but also from having different gifts which benefit us all. This is where the diversity element of our reading today comes in. He writes 'The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith.' That applies at the local church level. It is no use everyone wanting to be a bell-ringer, or a lesson reader. But we need both bell-ringers and lesson readers – and multiplicity of other jobs done as well. We need people with particular spiritual gifts. But the same applies in the wider church. We need people like the Roman Catholics, the Orthodox, the Pentecostals, the Methodists, the Baptists and the whoever's. Each have gifts to give to us all, and without them we would be the poorer. But we need to benefit from the differences within the overall sense of belonging together, which is why coming to recognise each other's memberships, and ministries and sacraments is so central.

And in that sense I believe there is a bottom-up hopefulness, even if sometimes there is a top-down despair. Fifty years ago people thought far more in terms of difference than they do now. Compare the situation when I was a boy – and a devout RC lady felt she couldn't even come to our school carol service because it was in an Anglican church. We *have* moved on considerably. The Pope about six weeks ago issued an important document which tries to take things forward at an institutional level. Let me quote a little from it: 'Conciliar fellowship should be promoted through regular consultations with Bishops and Primates of other churches, as well as through meetings

among Church leaders at a worldwide level to make visible and deepen the communion they already share.’

People move between denominations fairly more easily than they did then. The labels matter far far less for the person in the pew. That is unfortunately not so with the person on the General Synod, or its equivalent, and even less so for some of those who wear hats of authority like mitres. I had an interesting example of that a few years back. The Diocese of Guildford had a link with the RC Diocese of Evry in Paris. When I went with our handbell ringers and they were playing at the main Mass at the Cathedral, I was asked to read the Gospel (in French... with translation, maybe for the benefit of the English, maybe for the French who hadn't understood me!), give the peace, stand by the President and concelebrate, and give the blessing. When the Bishop went a few weeks later, he didn't get asked to do those things – it would have been difficult because of his position. Never mind the hierarchy and the synods - people say (even if not our loud) to their church leaders – ‘you can go on debating, but I will simply live out the unity I know to be the truth of my relationship with Mr or Mrs So-and-So as a fellow believer. And, God bless the Church of England, we do at least make an attempt at some of that. We welcome anyone who goes to Communion in any church to receive communion in ours. It is a small bit of trying to do make unity visible. But let's not pretend the scandal of disunity isn't a vital issue. Our avowed purpose is to help people to find faith. We want them to be our brothers and sisters in Christ, wherever they may find it best for them to worship. And we will do that by recognising and developing the diversity of gifts that we share with each other. Ephesians talks about the importance of both unity and diversity. Those things remain things we need to hold together today.