

Unity or Uniformity?

Here we are in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. That a great thing to be praying for. That Christians so often disagree makes proclaiming the Gospel much much harder. But what exactly are people praying for? My concern is that some at least may be praying unconsciously, if not consciously, for Church Uniformity, which is something entirely different. I remember being at a meeting in the Senate House in Cambridge in 1965 at which the Mission Society USPG was being formed from two previous groups - UMCA and SPG. The speaker was the saintly and wise Archbishop Michael Ramsey. I can still hear his rather querulous voice saying "I don't want the whole world to be become Anglican. I should feel very sorry for them if they did."

What we need is unity, not uniformity. I find the liturgy of the Church of England helps me to worship. I find that some other forms of worship don't do so, at least not as well. But the reverse will be true for some other people. We need the diversity of different forms of worship in order that all of us can find the ways that help us. And sometimes that diversity is to be found in different denominations, rather than a variety of worship styles within our own church.

But what of differences in belief? That has been an issue from the beginning of the Christian era. The first Christians wrestled with whether or not Gentile converts also had to keep Jewish laws and practices. The so-called Council of Jerusalem, which we read about in Acts, seems to record a decision to compromise. But it is clear that some found that hard to accept, and even today there are minute groups of Christians who still practice circumcision and eat kosher food. And arguments about different beliefs have continued thorough the ages. This year we are celebrating the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, from which emerged the Creed which in a slightly revised form we say every Sunday morning. The 'Catholic Creeds' as they became known have enabled a great deal of unity within diversity, with most but not all Christian groups subscribing to the doctrines in them. That Creed was ultimately written because of arguments about how Jesus could be both human and divine. If we move forward in time, we find that at the Reformation there were enormous arguments about how we are to understand the presence of Christ in Communion. Christians loved each other so much over that issue that sometimes they burned people they disagreed with alive. In today's Church of England there are people who believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and those who deny it. My question has always been 'If you don't believe in the Real Presence do you therefore believe in the Real Absence?'

Roll on time again and we have in the lifetime of people today arguments about whether women can be ordained priest, and within our so-called united Church there are those who believe they can, and a much smaller number who believe they can't. And that smaller number therefore have their own Bishops because they cannot accept the ministry of a Bishop who has ordained women, let alone a Bishop who is a woman herself. In the coming year I suspect we are going to have some very disunited things said at Synod and

elsewhere about whether same-sex relationships can be blessed, or indeed whether such relationships are sinful. Already some who think the latter are making noises about wanting to have their own Bishops who think the same way.

What I want is for us to have honest debate about all these things, but for that to take place in the context of all of us accepting the differences and respecting those who hold them. Too often that mutual respect doesn't seem to be around. To quote a c.19th Bishop of Gloucester "Orthodoxy is my doxy; heterodoxy is another man's doxy". However right we may feel we are on whatever the issue, we need to have the humility to say we might just be wrong.

All the disunity within our denomination, let alone between the different denominations could reasonably make us cry. Maybe we need instead to take a step back and laugh at ourselves instead.

Gulliver's Travels is a largely forgotten book. It tends to be thought of as a children's book, which of course it is not. It is a marvellous piece of satire, and in its original version, many people would regard it as highly unsuitable for children. If you have read it, you may recall that in the voyage to Lilliput, Gulliver is told about the war between Lilliput and Blefuscu, and about the terrible hostility between those who break their eggs at the big end, and those who break it at the small end. "It is computed that no less than 11,000 persons have at several times suffered death rather than submit to break their eggs at the smaller end. Many hundred large volumes have been published upon this controversy. But the books of the Big-Endians have been long forbidden, and the whole party rendered incapable by law of holding employments". We rightly laugh at it. But we need to remember that Jonathan Swift, who wrote it, was a clergyman. And one of the things he was trying to do was to make people think about the way they treated Roman Catholics and Non-conformists in his days. There was another book of his which people don't read so often, which was specifically about this - it is called The Tale of the Tub - in which three men are sailing - Peter (meaning the Roman Catholics) Martin (meaning the Dissenters) and Jack (meaning the C of E). It includes these words: 'If all those who attended conventicles (i.e. services which were not C of E) were banished the country, and the preachers hanged, we should soon be one church again.'

That might have produced uniformity. But what we must pray and work for is unity. Who are we united with? I go back to what scholars believe was the earliest baptismal Creed – just two words in Greek, three in English. They are "Jesus is Lord". If this person, or group, or this denomination, can say that, then whatever our differences in opinion belief and practice, we are united. And that mutual recognition of brothers and sisters in Christ is what we must pray for, not just this week, but all the time.