

## **HOMILY FOR THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY St Mary's Church, Barnes on Sunday 22 January 2017**

My thanks first to the Rector of St Mary's for his warm welcome and hospitality and my thanks also to the group of Christian churches here in Barnes for so kindly inviting me to join you for this Unity Service and to preach. A special thanks to the choir especially for the Stanford in C. In his autobiography, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor said that he would become an Anglican for the sake of Choral Evensong! Today we give thanks in particular for the covenant among the Christian churches here in Barnes which has been in place for over 25 years and which has been simplified and today is being renewed. I am pleased and delighted that my former teacher and good friend Fr Tony Logan is here today especially as he was in the parish when the original covenant was signed.

The first month of a new year is a good time to look back and to look forward. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is a good time for us to look back on the story of our ecumenical journey (where we have come from) and also to look forward (where we are going). Unity is both a gift and a task. It is a gift from God and our task is to welcome that gift and to make it visible to others. We listened earlier to the Gospel of the Prodigal Son which is a good reminder that our divisions as Christians are, at heart, a family matter - like a family estrangement or split which is still in the process of being fully resolved and healed after all these years.

I'd like to look back by offering you three snapshots from my own ecumenical journey.

The first is a snapshot from 1958. That was the year when my family moved from Dublin to Chatham when I was 8 years old. My dad had lost his job as a bus conductor and so had travelled to Chatham in Kent to look for work and to find a place for my mum and us five kids to live. When we arrived there was no places available in the local Catholic primary school and so I and my two brothers went to the local state school –Glencoe Road Primary School – where RCs stood outside the hall during assembly while prayers were being said and were then marched in for the notices. I remember having to pretend not to like the hymns that attracted me as I heard them from a distance and which as Catholics we never sang. In those days, as Protestants sang hymns, Catholics didn't; as Protestants read the Bible Catholics didn't! Now thank God, we read

the Scriptures together and sing each other's hymns – literally singing from the same hymn sheet! Someone remarked recently that over the last 50 years we have learnt to sing in unison and now we are beginning to learn to sing in harmony.

The next snapshot is 1966. That was 50 years ago now and just a year after the ending of the Second Vatican Council. You will recall that 1966 was the year of the first formal visit of an Archbishop of Canterbury to a Pope since the Reformation. Archbishop Michael Ramsey met Blessed Pope Paul VI who famously took off his episcopal ring and gave it as a gesture of friendship to Archbishop Ramsey. I recall Peter Hebblethwaite in his biography of Paul VI mentioning that Archbishop Ramsey was amazed by the large number of Italians who came out to greet and cheer him without realising that many of them had got him confused with Sir Alf Ramsey, the famous England football manager.

My own encounter that year was not so historic but, for me, no less significant.

In September 1966 I moved school to a sixth-form in Rochester for my A levels and was privileged to make friends fairly quickly with Paul Hatt who was and is a devout Anglican evangelical – even though he ended up marrying a Catholic. He, his family and his Church (the very vibrant community of St Philip and St James in Walderslade) taught me much about the importance of reading, praying and living the Scriptures – long before the term “receptive ecumenism” came into use. I remember that Paul used to carry a Gideon's version of the New Testament and Psalms in the top pocket of his blazer and during the lunchbreak he would unobtrusively slip away to a corner of the room and spend ten or minutes or so quietly reading and pondering God's Word – while the rest of us continued chatting and playing cards! His example taught me to come to have a love of the Scriptures and how they nourish and sustain my faith.

The third snapshot is from 1990 when I was appointed as the Catholic Parish Priest to St Paul's Ecumenical Church, Thamesmead in south-east London. I had, I think, always been keen on ecumenism ‘in my head’ but my experience at Thamesmead taught me to be ecumenical ‘in my heart’ too. St Paul's was a modern church building opened in 1978 and shared by four denominations – Anglican, Methodist, United Reformed and Roman Catholic. I went there in 1990 and was there for six years. There were two chapels (an RC chapel and a United Congregation chapel) separated by a corridor which was known by the

parishioners as Reformation corridor – a wooden construction that in case of unity can easily be dismantled! We not only shared the same building but we also shared the collection – a real case of literally putting one’s money where one’s mouth is! Most distinctively at that time, once a month we had a celebration of what were called ‘Simultaneous Eucharists’ when both congregations joined together with two altars on the sanctuary and the lectern in between. The liturgy of the Word was completely shared (with the homily being given by one of the ecumenical Team) and then we moved to our respective altars but used the same Eucharistic Prayer which was said simultaneously – praying for the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury as well as our own respective diocesan bishops and other Church leaders. People would then go to their own minister for Holy Communion and the service would end with the sign of peace followed by refreshments. In 1993 a new Vatican document outlining Principles and Norms on Ecumenism effectively brought this bold ecumenical experiment to an end. Although it did not permit prayers to be said for other Christian leaders during the Eucharistic Prayer itself it did permit and indeed encourage prayers for them to be said during the Intercessions or Bidding Prayers –although in my experience this sadly rarely happens. Perhaps we could all make a simple start there and pray for the leaders of all our churches as a reminder that the origin and heart of this Unity Week was and is to encourage prayer for the unity of the church so that the world may believe.

A lot has happened in the church and in the world since the 1990s but let me now try to look forward. This year marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation and this is the first time in history that a centenary anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation is being commemorated in an ecumenical age. So I begin with Fr Freddie Broomfield who taught Mgr Canon James Cronin and myself church history when we were seminarians in the 1970s. When one student famously asked Fr Broomfield whether the Reformation would have happened if Martin Luther hadn’t appeared on the scene he replied drily “My dear boy, I’m an historian not a prophet. May I continue?”

It is easier to be an historian than a prophet. So what might the ecumenical future look like? We don’t have any snapshots but might we have any glimpses? I was very struck by some words that Pope Francis addressed recently in an audience he gave to those taking part in a plenary session of the

Pontifical Council for Christian Unity last November on the theme: “Christian Unity: what model for full communion?”

Pope Francis referred to the important ecumenical meetings he had attended throughout this year – which included both the Anglican-Catholic Dialogue meeting in Rome and the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue at Lund in Sweden last October. He stressed that it is by growing closer to the person of Christ and conforming ourselves to him - personally and as a community – that we also grow closer to others - and that this is the soul and the heart of ecumenical talking and walking.

He went on importantly to list three “false models” of communion – three things that full communion is not.

- First, unity is not the fruit of our human effort but is instead “a gift that comes from on high” – a gift of the Spirit. It is something for us to receive rather than achieve.
- Secondly, unity is not uniformity. Our different traditions, he said, are a wealth for and not a threat to the unity of the Church. Seeking to suppress this diversity is to counter the Holy Spirit who acts by enriching the community of believers with a variety of gifts.
- Thirdly, unity is not absorption. No one would have to deny their own history of faith. Unity is not being swallowed up into one big blob, as somebody said to me recently. Before seeing what separates us, it is necessary to perceive the wealth of what we have in common and especially the Scriptures and the Creeds. In this way we Christians are able to acknowledge, as you are doing so clearly and so well here in Barnes, that we are brothers and sisters who are called not to compete with one another but to collaborate in joint witness and mission to the part of the world in which we live – and for you that is Barnes.

What I find interesting is that Pope Francis doesn't offer a ‘true’ model of communion. He is happy to leave the destination in God's hands and in God's time. Our gift and our task is to walk the journey together. “Remember,” Pope Francis has said, that *“when we work, pray and serve the needy together, we are already united.”*