

That They May Be One

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 1 June 2014, by David Gill. Readings for the seventh Sunday of Easter were 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11 and St John 17:1-11

“Holy Father,” Jesus prayed, “protect them ... that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one”.

Today begins the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. In the northern hemisphere, the observance falls in January. Here, of course, the Church spends January lying on the beach, so we have different dates.

Preachers should not talk about themselves. But indulge me for a moment. This week always brings back a painful memory.

It was 1968, and I had just joined the staff of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. A staff meeting was discussing the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. In a moment of madness, I decided to give everyone the benefit of my wisdom.

The Week of Prayer, I told them, was a waste of time. Every year the churches pray for unity and talk about unity, then steadfastly refuse to make the changes that unity requires. It is an annual exercise in hypocrisy, I said, and it should be scrapped forthwith. My new colleagues treated this insight with the respect it deserved: they ignored it. But the moment we broke for coffee, I knew I was in trouble.

For seated at the back of the hall was the World Council's founding general secretary, a Dutch theologian named Willem Visser 't Hooft. Retired but still an awe-inspiring presence around the place, the old boss, as he was known, came at me like a bull at a gate.

“The trouble with you young fellers,” he began, waving an irate finger in my face, “is, you have no sense of history. Don't you realize how far the churches have come? Can't you recognize an answer to prayer when it's staring you in the face?” What was staring me in the face was one very angry Dutchman, and he didn't look much like an answer to any prayer of mine. But that traumatic moment in my ecumenical education taught me three valuable lessons.

First, if you're planning to make an inflammatory speech, you should always check first to see who may be lurking at the back of the hall.

Second, if you want to make sense of the church, and particularly the ecumenical movement, you had better keep your sense of history well honed.

Third, Visser 't Hooft was dead right: the churches have indeed come a very long way in a very short span of years.

The people of St Stephen's are well aware of the transformation that's taken place in interchurch relationships. We have lived through it. Indeed, we've had the privilege of playing our bit parts in one of the most rapid, far-reaching movements of renewal the church of Jesus Christ has ever known.

But the movement for Christian unity has not reached its goal yet. Consider the situation in which ecumenism now finds itself. Where we are today is very appealing. It is also, however, quite unbearable.

Appealing? Well, yes. Denominational relationships have improved greatly. Old tensions have faded. Churches cooperate on so many fronts. A leader of the Conference of European Churches put it well. "The status quo," he said, "is all the more pleasant when it is among friends".

Indeed it is. The trouble is, we are tempted to downgrade the ecumenical vision to fit. The influential journalist John Allen exemplified this when he argued, in the *National Catholic Reporter*, that pluralism is the way of the world, churches should rejoice in the cooperation thus far achieved, and nobody should expect Christian unity this side of the Second Coming.

In other words, what we have is as good as it gets. So forget what we thought was the goal of this journey. Put your feet up and relax. Enjoy the status quo.

Where we are today is also, however, utterly unbearable. For two reasons.

First, our hearts cry out for more.

Archbishop Aghan Baliozian, primate of the Armenian Apostolic Church, was a fine pastor, a dedicated ecumenist and a great friend. While with the National Council of Churches I was invited regularly to share in Christmas celebrations at their cathedral in Chatswood and then, after the liturgy, speak to the congregation. His welcome was always "Father David, we welcome you to this church, for our church is your church too". Note the *your*.

In 2007 the Uniting Church marked its 30th birthday. The ABC ran a rather poor Compass program about it which included a few seconds of me. Next morning my phone rang. It was Bede Heather, the former Catholic bishop of Parramatta. "David," he said, "it was good to see you on the box last night. But I thought Compass was a bit unfair to our Uniting Church." Note the *our*.

Then there was the gathering of Queensland Churches Together. A few people were talking with Philip Aspinall, the Anglican primate, about the tough time his church was having. I think it was a Uniting Church voice that said, with feeling: “When the Anglican communion bleeds, my heart bleeds too”.

Isn't that where we are now? The days of “us” and “them” are, thank God, gone forever. We are all “us”. Each denominational identity has an unseen plus sign. We still wear those labels. But now they are “Uniting plus ...”, “Catholic plus ...”. We don't yet have the doctrinal formulae to express it or the organizational relationships to embody it, but in our hearts we know it is true: we belong to one another because we belong to Christ. Our hearts cry out for more.

Second, and more importantly, the heart of God cries out for more.

The gospel is not about being enabled to tolerate our divisions. It's about the reconciling power of God in Christ that ends them. Our lord's prayer was not that his people might be friends, or cooperate, or form councils of churches, but that they may be one with an intimacy reflecting that of the triune God.

So how are we to move forward? The general secretary of the World Council of Churches was in the Swiss capital, Berne, speaking on the role of the churches in a world of political and religious conflict. One sentence in that speech caught my attention: “Christians must develop the spiritual capacity to hear and see the grace of God in the other,” he said.

Translate that to our interchurch relationships. Christians must develop not the diplomatic skill to charm the other, not the political know-how to manipulate the other, not the worldly power to coerce the other, not the theological clout to convert the other. But the spiritual capacity to discern what is truly of God in the other.

Such an emphasis shifts the ecumenical problem away from the other—the denomination that's difficult to get on with, the bishop who won't play ball, the doctrinal stance that seems set in concrete – and focuses attention back on us. Not just the experts, the church leaders, the ecumenical bureaucrats, but us, and our capacity to discern. Christian unity is no mere exercise in ecclesiastical carpentry. It's about transforming hearts and minds, nothing less.

Which sounds like a big ask. Too big?

Whenever the ecumenical task has looked a bit daunting – and when has it not? – I cast my mind back to the Berlin Wall. Remember it? The watch towers, lights, armed guards, minefields, barbed wire. Some of you here saw that monstrosity, cutting a great city in half. The wall looked so solid, so unchallengeable. It seemed destined to last for centuries. Then suddenly, on 9 November 1989, with a sudden push of people power, it crumbled.

A few years later, at an ecumenical gathering in a reunited Berlin, one of the speakers was Cardinal Walter Kasper, then the Vatican's point man for Christian unity and now, interestingly, the theologian said to have most influence on Pope Francis. Kasper was speaking about the significance of a major agreement that had just been reached between the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches on the disputed issue of justification. He said this.

More common ground has been reached in the last almost forty years than in the 450 years since the Reformation. That is reason enough not to give up, but to look to the future with hope. More than ever, we need a new ecumenical optimism.

Then, using Berlin as an analogy, he suggested unity may come in a way that takes us all by surprise. *If, on the morning of 9 November 1989, you had asked the people of West Berlin 'How long do you think the wall will remain standing?' the majority of them would probably have answered: 'We can be happy to think that some day our grandchildren will be able to pass through the Brandenburg Gate'. By evening of that memorable day the world saw a Berlin that was surprisingly changed.*

I am firmly convinced of it: some day we too, in like manner, will rub our eyes and marvel at how the Spirit of God has broken through the wall of division and opened up new paths for us.

He is right. So let me, belatedly, retract the rash words I spoke those 46 long years ago in Geneva. Keep up the prayers for Christian unity.

True, it may take a miracle. But as Berliners will tell you, miracles do happen. Especially when hated walls are crying out for demolition.

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