

CHORAL EVENSONG FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

ST JAMES' KING STREET

4:00PM, 29 MAY 2022

The Rev'd Dr Ray Williamson OAM

A few weeks ago, our General Synod met in Queensland. For many, maybe all, it seems not to have been a pleasant time. It revealed what one bishop has mildly described as “significant and challenging differences of conviction in our common life”. In reality, those differences are being used to deepen the fracture in the communion of the Anglican Church.

In his address to the General Synod of the Church of England earlier in the year, the Archbishop of Canterbury offered a different vision. He said communities must learn to look at the world as a single unit rather than through “the lens of narrow nationalism, factionalism, politics, economics, or self-selecting group”. He spoke of the tension between individualism and community, other tensions, such as about climate change and those caused by the inequities between nations and between generations. The challenges of the age go to the heart of what it means to love one’s neighbour, he said. A change in perspective is the challenge facing humanity.

One can easily see the relevance of the archbishop’s words to the whole global community, but also their relevance for us, for life in the Church and the quest for Christian unity. It all comes down to how we look at the Church. Do we see it as the Church, as a single unit, the one Body of Christ, or do we see it through the lens of narrow denominationalism and factionalism? A change of perspective is the ecumenical challenge facing Christian people.

The first reading – Isaiah 35 – offers a change of perspective. The prophetic messenger encourages a people without hope by announcing that their deliverance is at hand. He offers a vision that is hope-filled and transformative. The OT scholar, Walter Brueggemann says that the prophetic ministry “is to *bring to public expression those very hopes and yearnings* that have been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that we can no longer know they are there”. It is “to express a future that none think imaginable”.¹ If we ask what this text from the ancient world was saying to those to whom it was first addressed, it was clearly speaking of release from actual captivity – captivity in many forms – and celebrating restoration and homecoming. It was speaking of the unimaginable.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (WPCU) is a time to pray for our release from another kind of captivity – denominationalism and factionalism; the sin of disunity – to imagine the unimaginable. The WPCU invites us to live as a sign of our oneness in Christ and to pray for our growing into deeper and more visible expressions of that unity.

An Octave of Prayer for Unity was first observed in 1908.

This was the result of a proposal by Paul Wattson, a Franciscan Friar in the US, that an “Octave of Christian Unity” be observed from 18th January (the Feast of the Confession of

¹ Brueggemann, Walter, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Fortress Press, 1989, pp. 67, 66.

St Peter) to 25th January (the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul). As a convert from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism, he conceived of unity as all Christians following his path of conversion. Pope Pius X officially blessed the concept of this Octave, and Pope Benedict XV encouraged its observance throughout the entire Roman Catholic Church.

In the 1930s, Abbé Paul Couturier, in France, had a different approach. He advocated prayer "for the unity of the Church as Christ wills it, and in accordance with the means he wills", thereby enabling other Christians with differing views about how unity was to be achieved to join in the prayer. In 1935, it was proposed that an annual octave of prayer for unity amongst Christians be observed in the week leading to Pentecost.

In 1948, with the founding of the World Council of Churches (WCC), the WPCU became increasingly recognised by different churches throughout the world. It was first observed in Australia in 1954.

A significant change occurred in 1968, when there was the first official use of materials prepared jointly by the WCC Faith and Order Commission and the Pontifical Council for promoting Christian Unity, representing the entire Catholic Church. Ever since, the preparation of the resources for the Week has been a joint project of these two bodies, always beginning with an ecumenical group in one country being invited to prepare the initial draft of the material.

For 2022, that initial work was done by the Middle East Council of Churches. Because, as they remind us, the history of the Middle East "was, and still is, characterised by conflict and strife, tainted by blood and darkened by injustice and oppression", they chose the story of the Magi as the focus for their theme. They see that story offering a contrast to their reality. "The Magi", they write, "have sometimes been seen as a symbol of the world's diversity – different religions and cultures. The story might therefore represent the unity of all creation that God desires".

So, the WPCU is an opportunity to remind ourselves about ecumenism and the whole ecumenical endeavour of the churches. Since the early years of the 20th century, that endeavour has been driven by a vision of unity. As a recent WCC publication observes, that endeavour has kept the focus on the visible unity of the Church, and has brought the churches to agreement on much more than they disagree about the apostolic faith, about the sacraments and about the vital importance of mission. But they have questions still about what unity might look like, about the limits to diversity and about how to resolve today's most difficult divisions, particularly on moral issues.²

Through that whole endeavour, over the years, naturally, the way we have 'seen' the ecumenical vision has changed, broadened and been clarified. But always it has been and is a vision of wholeness, of oneness:

- of something beyond the brokenness of the world and our misuse of its resources
- of something beyond the factionalism within our churches and the divisions between them.

² *WHAT ARE THE CHURCHES SAYING TO THE CHURCHES – Key Findings and Proposals from the Responses to The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 236, Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021.

So, it is a vision that offers us a different way of seeing the Church – not through the narrow lens of denominationalism and factionalism, but from a different perspective, the perspective of unity, of the oneness all Christians have in Christ.

At a time when the world faces many terrible crises, we in the Church recognise just how relevant still that vision is, for it calls, lures the Church to become a more authentic sign of, and more effective instrument for, the unity of the whole human community and the well-being of the earth.

In the passage we heard from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians (5:14-20), one of his basic points is that people have value because of Christ. People, whoever they are, whether they have responded to Christ or not, are treasured by God. The problem rests with us. We often want to establish hurdles that others must jump before we will grant them value. They must think as we do, act as we do, believe as we do, deal with our issues the way we want them to – the list could go on! No, said Paul, each person's value has *already* been established by Christ.

Therefore, for Paul, it follows that reconciliation is at the heart of what we are on about, at the centre of the business of our lives. If the most important single factor about any of our lives is God's having reconciled us to God's very self, Paul argued, then the proper celebration of our reconciliation is to share it with others by fostering reconciliation wherever and whenever we can.

The Christian gospel is the good news of reconciliation. The ecumenical question is: how can the Church preach that gospel with any authenticity if the Church itself is fractured and its parts unreconciled?

It is so comfortable for that question not to be asked; it is so easy for us to be trapped in the reality we know, for the vision to be dimmed.

The WPCU holds the vision before us, and asks us to pray for, to imagine the unimaginable – life lived as a reflection of our unity in God.

We have also been reminded of that unity by Psalm 133.

It is a psalm about community, about the joy of people pilgrimaging toward God. The Hebrew people sang this psalm to express their joy in coming together for worship.

In three short verses, the singer likens the goodness of kindred living together in unity to two powerful images – oil and dew.

Community, fellowship, is like rich oil that soaks into your dry skin, whose fragrance lingers, a blessing that comes from God, that adorns us from head to toe and consecrates our lives.

Community, fellowship, is “like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion”. That's strange! Mt Hermon is part of a ridge between Syria and Lebanon, the highest peak in the region, over 200 kms from Jerusalem. How does its dew water Zion? Hermon has its share of heavy rainfall and snow, and the moisture seeps down through subterranean streams that feed into the Jordan river. The dew of Hermon brings life to the whole region. It begins at one particular summit and cascades down from there.

Community, fellowship, unity starts with a few insiders but flows outward in blessing for many. The dew of Hermon brings life to the whole region – just like a community of people living in unity can, a community dedicated to one another and to seeking the purposes of God for us in these times.

The WPCU is an intentional time to pray that the Church, and each one of us, may be a little like the dew of Hermon – a source of unity and blessing.