

Sermon(s) for The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

St James the Greater, Leicester, 22 January 2017

I discovered this week that these Weeks of Prayer for Christian Unity, first known as the “Octaves of Prayer for Christian Unity”, were instituted as far back as 1908. It was in the pontificate of Benedict XV, during the First World War, that the Roman Catholic Church was encouraged to participate in them fully. This year will see the 500th anniversary on 31 October of Martin Luther fixing his “95 Theses” or “Disputation on the Power of Indulgences” to the door of All Saints’ Church in Wittenberg, often regarded as the event which launched the Reformation. So in this year we might say that our participation in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has added poignancy.

Well might we be tempted to ask how much there is to show for more than a century of so much prayer. A Roman Catholic like me, keen on developing an ecumenical understanding between the Christian Churches, looks back over the last 50 years sees much to highlight in those years.

In 1966, Pope Paul the Sixth met with Archbishop Michael Ramsay in the basilica of St Paul outside-the-Walls in Rome. The Pope gave the Archbishop the episcopal ring once given him by the people of Milan.

Pope Paul met two years before in Jerusalem with the Orthodox Patriarch Athenagoras. This was the first such meeting since 1054 when the papal legate had laid on the high altar to the Hagia Sophia cathedral in Constantinople the papal bull of excommunication which confirmed the schism between Eastern and Western Christendom.

The Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission has agreed statements on such matters as the Eucharist, Church Authority and on the place of Mary the Mother of God in our theology and in our devotional practice. And similar conversations have taken place between the Methodist Church and Roman Catholics.

Many of us will recall the visit of Pope John Paul to this country in 1981 and how he and Archbishop Robert Runcie knelt together at the place in Canterbury Cathedral where it is said Thomas Becket was murdered. More recently, there was the visit of Pope Benedict XVI in 2010 and the obvious delight he took in participating in evensong in Westminster Abbey.

The present Pope Francis is ecumenically active. He has already met many times with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. Last year they travelled together to the Greek island of Lesbos where they demonstrated their solidarity with the unspeakable suffering of the refugees risking their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

In February last, the Pope met in Cuba with Patriarch Kiril of the Russian Orthodox Church. Then in October he travelled to the gathering in Lund of the world-wide Lutheran family as they marked the beginning of their celebration of the 500th anniversary Martin Luther’s protest. There the Pope spoke of the question that haunted Martin Luther about God’s

mercy as the decisive question of our lives and “Justification by Faith” as the “essence of human existence before God”.

Earlier in that same month, Archbishop Welby had celebrated Vespers with Pope Francis in the Church of St Gregory the Great, the pope who had sent St Augustine to England, and had presented him with his own pectoral cross of nails while the Pope presented the Archbishop with a replica of St Gregory’s crozier.

Many of you, whose earlier years were, like mine, marked more by divisions between us than by the brotherly and sisterly respect and affection to which these events give testimony, can hopefully add highlights of the past fifty years of your own: stories of partnership in mission, maybe in hospitals and hospices, in centres for the homeless and in prisons; of growth in mutuality and in respect for each other’s traditions.

Perhaps because of these signs of so much progress, you are saddened, as I am, that corporate unity cannot be achieved in the near future, that the doctrinal differences which we respect are also very real.

I have long been attracted by the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and have often wondered at the fact that while in prison in the last months of the war, he could write about the place of gratitude in the Christian community and of how our gratitude is the doorway through which God continues to bestow his blessings on us. Taking my cue from Bonhoeffer, I have been asking myself what it is I give thanks for in my own ecumenical experience.

I come from a family of many religious traditions. On my father’s side my grandmother was an Anglican from near Whitehaven in Cumberland who more than fifty years ago would always see that her grandchildren, when staying with her for the summer holidays, attended mass every Sunday. My grandfather and his family were Methodists from the village of Topsham just outside Exeter where they helped build the Methodist chapel. On my mother’s side, my grandmother was born in Leeds of an Irish Catholic mother while her husband, my grandfather, was a Norwegian Lutheran.

I would like to say that my childhood was enriched by these many Christian traditions represented in our family but I was brought up by my Catholic mother, graciously supported by my Anglican father, in a Catholic home, in a Catholic parish and in a Catholic school run by the religious order, the Society of Jesus, of which I have now been a member for more than 40 years.

But I will always give thanks for this: my father’s faith in Christ meant a great deal to him and he taught me so much. He was educated at Rugby School, and whether because of that or for other reasons, I am not sure, he believed that his following of Christ was first of all about the way in which in business life, as much as in the home, he treated those who worked with him and for him with courtesy and kindness, never loading them with his own problems but doing all he could, by hard work and good humour, to lift theirs. I will always be deeply grateful for my father and the Anglican heritage as I received it from him and would be less of a Jesuit today without it.

I feel ashamed to say this, but my experience of the Church in ecumenical mode came quite late, only about 20 years ago.

I was already ordained a priest and was engaged in my last year of training as a Jesuit. We have a long formation: ordination for a Jesuit can come 14 years after entry into the order, as it did for me, and is sometimes said to be “a reward for a life well spent!” Our final year of training is like a third year of novitiate and involves an extended period of apostolic ministry in a setting and often in a place that is unfamiliar to us.

This final year took me to the small, beautiful South American country of Guyana, located on the Atlantic Ocean sandwiched in between Venezuela and Brazil. Twenty years ago it was reckoned to be the poorest country in South America after Haiti and it was just emerging from almost 30 years of one party dictatorship. The British Jesuits had been working there for 150 years and I was sent to the capital city, Georgetown, to work with them.

One of the missions I was asked to undertake was to work as a chaplain, part-time, in the city’s prison. There hadn’t been a Catholic chaplain there for a decade or more. I had never so much as set foot in a prison and had no idea where to begin. I was delighted and greatly relieved to be told that the Anglican chaplain, John, who was on secondment from England to Guyana for some years, would be very willing to provide help.

Built by the British in colonial days for perhaps 500, the Camp Street Prison held at that time maybe 1500. It was very overcrowded, in a shocking state of disrepair, with the men sleeping in the dining room, in the corridors, wherever, and prison discipline was harsh.

John and I went to the prison two or three times a week. On Friday mornings, there would be a service; on Friday afternoons, I, and I think he, would provide basic lessons in literacy and numeracy. On Wednesday afternoons, we would visit the men condemned to death, going from one cell to the next speaking individually to each one.

We did all this together. We’d plan and deliver the weekly service, do what we could in the education line, visit the condemned men and afterwards we’d share our reactions to the experience.

It was all very hard. Getting into the prison was hard: we’d bang on the huge wooden gates and sometimes were refused entry. The smell, one of the effects of the over-crowding, was overpowering. As we entered the prison yard, the men, corralled into pens behind chicken wire, would shout at us – “Father John (usually), Father Michael (less often), can you phone my mum?” “Father John, Father Michael, I need toothpaste”. What were we to do with so many demands thrown at us on all sides from these desperately poor people? And the injustice of it all was what hurt us most: we knew that some of those men condemned to death were innocent. They appealed, yes; but appeals might take years to be heard.

We had a poverty of our own. We had next to no status. The needs were great but it was beyond our combined imagination to know how to begin to meet them. We planned but there was not much point in planning because everything was so unpredictable. All we could do was to be there and let our intuition guide us, hopefully inspired by the Spirit of God; and perhaps it was our helplessness that helped us speak to theirs. There were disappointments.

John distributed copies of the Bible and New Testament. One morning we were summoned to the governor who showed us a plastic bag full of their torn-out pages which had been twisted to hold drugs.

In this context, I learnt so much from John about how to go about ministry with the most marginalised: how to listen, how to speak, how to pray, how to recognise the presence of Christ in the midst of helplessness, ours and theirs, and how to offer compassion. I can see us now, on the corridor, talking through the bars of the cells with men condemned to death, holding hands and praying.

From our two different traditions we were one in sharing what Fr Henri Nouwen calls the “descending way of Jesus”, “Who though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself”. No status, no power and not much respect. And in that context our work was truly together and, in its way, it was fruitful.

All of which makes me think. Yes, corporate unity matters and we must strive to achieve the unity for which Christ our Saviour prayed. But I wonder this: perhaps this kind of partnership in pastoral mission - in which we need to lay aside so much of ourselves and embrace the way of Jesus and so make present today the ministry of Jesus – is the context out of which that organic unity is going to grow.

The problem is that when faced with our vulnerability and helplessness in mission, as in our personal lives so in ministry, we look for props for our fragile self-confidence in status, position and in power, and it is those props which so often keep us apart. Instead, we need to embrace our helplessness as our way of embracing the poor Jesus who chose the humbler way and whose ministry can only flourish today, ecumenically, when together we embrace that humbler way too.

This is what my ecumenical experience taught me and, with a nod to Bonhoeffer, being grateful for it is, I believe, the doorway through which the Lord will continue to bestow his blessings.

All this has much to say to me: I hope it can say something to you as well.

Michael Holman SJ
Heythrop College, University of London
