

The Chaplain writes...*about unity*

As I write, we are in the midst of the annual Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity. I discovered by accident a few days ago that an American survey of the state of Christianity worldwide suggests that at the beginning of 2016 there were something like 46,000 different denominations, and the rate of increase is something like 2.4 new denominations *per day*.

Even as a Scot, used to seeing division after division within the Established Kirk and its subsequent offshoots, I am horrified by this figure. It's true that part of it is a recognition that so-called *independent churches* spring up all over the place. Whilst some of them will remain just that, *fiercely independent*, hopefully some at least will find accommodating neighbours and form affiliations together, and ultimately with the mainstream Church.

But much of this proliferation is sadly due, not to the Holy Spirit promoting new expressions of service and community, but due to human sin. Certainly the sin of *pride*. And in particular the kind of human sin that refuses to see in any way other than with *tunnel vision*. Refusing to admit that where we find and discover and celebrate the wonderful diversity of creation, we must at the same time admit a whole number of different *responses* to the Gospel of Christ. The work of the Holy Spirit in human lives is about the drawing of the many into the One beating loving healing heart of God, whose own unity gives birth to all that is. As such, that work will *challenge* us, will open our eyes to see truth in places where we are not inclined to seek it, and in particular will undermine that *self-satisfaction* and *self-pleasing* that debilitates and destroys our humanity.

For the work of the Holy Spirit in human lives isn't first and foremost about giving us certain wonderful experiences, or producing extraordinary and unexpected healings. First and foremost, the Spirit is given to draw us into communion - into *koinonia*. Into *unity* - with *God* and with *one another*. That's why we refer in so many hymns to the Spirit as the **Creator Spirit**. For as one Catechism reminds us "*God...in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man [sic] to make*

him share in his own blessed life... He calls man to seek him, to know him, [and] to love him with all his strength. Or, as the Reformation Westminster Catechism more baldly puts it “Q. *What is the chief end of man? A. Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.*” The work of the Holy Spirit in human lives is this work. The drawing of the many into the One that we may realize our calling. Our calling to live *in communion*. Because that is to share in *God’s own life* where *communion* constitutes *being*. *God is communion*, living in relationship - which is part of what the doctrine of the Trinity speaks about. Anything that opposes this growing into communion is sinful - and the sin is deep-set. It’s not just people setting up their own churches that is sinful - there is sin in the perceived or real rejection that such people find from the mainstream Church too which provokes such action.

Sin stops us from finding our true selves by losing them in communion. Very rapidly it erects barriers to isolate us both from one another and from the living God. When this happens in the life of the Church, the *community* that is supposed to be a *sacrament of God* in the pattern of Jesus, the Sacrament of God, then this is indeed *mortal sin*. Deadly sin.

And when it happens, when Christian people isolate themselves from one another by drawing lines of demarcation between what they will and will not accept, or between whom they will or will not accept as part of their communities, then progressively those communities cease to be saving realities in our world. A *divided Church* is simply a *Church not fit for purpose*.

So the call to unity for Christian people is not a call to some administrative tidiness, a call to become a streamlined instrument of the Gospel. The call to unity is a call for the Church to be its *true self*. A sacrament of encounter with the living God, the *One God*, whose very being *is communion*. *Koinonia – the Way of true life*.

That this is an even greater necessity in our own times should be self-evident. During 2016 we witnessed a whole progression of political events which illustrate just what a divided world we are presently inhabiting. A *divided Church* cannot effectively challenge this evil in our midst, cannot effectively offer another way, a *better way*. If our

faith is seen as a kind of pick-and-mix option, one choice amongst many others from the great supermarket shelves of life, then of course boundaries and choices begin to assume a significance and importance that they should not have.

But isolation is not part of the Gospel by which we live. The world we inhabit is a complex one, where life at the local level cannot be separated from events in a different part of the globe. The problems which this brings cannot be solved by a single nation alone, they cannot be solved by pulling up the drawbridge and lowering the portcullis as if we lived in a medieval castle. Yet last year we saw this mentality endorsed by two major nations in the world, and the signs for this coming year alert us to more of the same. Our *common humanity* demands something *better* if the interests of the *common good of that humanity* are to stand any chances of being adequately served.

A divided Church is at best *less than adequate* for giving a fuller vision. Our Lord prayed that his followers be *one* as he instituted the Eucharist, the sacrament of unity, the means by which what is signified is made real. He prayed that we might be *one* with the *Oneness of God* - the very being-as-communication revealed in the Trinity. Unity is not an optional extra, a five star rating. Unity is essential.

And, thank God, we have made some steps towards that. Even though statistics show us another picture. This city, home of the World Council of Churches, has made much possible in terms of mutual respect and understanding amongst Christian people.

But there is - all will acknowledge - a very great distance still to travel. And whilst we live in a political and cultural climate where isolation from, if not outright suspicion of, those who appear different from us in some easily definable way, then the work of unity is even more difficult.

Whilst there is much that can be seen to be lacking within our own Anglican Communion, there are some signs of hope. First, despite predictions to the contrary, the Anglican Communion has not split up. In fact there are more Anglican Christians worldwide now than there

were twenty years ago. A *lot* more, even if they are largely not found in the British Isles. And as part of a Church which unites both *reformed* and *Catholic* practice and understanding, we have a part to play in the global picture. It's true that we wrestle with mighty issues, not least in the field of sexual ethics. But we do this and continue to do this as *people-in-communion* - with each other and, as far as may be in this fallen world and broken Church, with God. And this goes beyond a kind of *mutual tolerance and respect* towards an *active celebration* of difference and diversity.

Because such diversity comes ultimately from the *unity of God*. Understanding this *unity of God* and *the unity of God's purpose in the diversity of human flourishing* is an important step towards the reunion of Christian people in a single Church.

For in reality, that *is* what we are, could we but see it. Our baptism unites us with Christ. Not with a particular *flavour* of Christ, nor a particular *language* of Christ. Certainly not with a *denomination* of Christ. That baptism into the One Christ who shares the Oneness of God absolutely, is nourished at every Eucharist. And as we are drawn deeper into the *koinonia* of God, we realize that the silly barriers we want to put up around ourselves, in whatever way, are just that. Things that get in the way of being truly human.

So we pray for unity. Not because it would be *nice* or *convenient* or *administratively tidy* or even because it would be easier for people to make a commitment if they don't have too many different competing choices. We pray for unity because unless we have such unity - in Christ with God, and in Christ with one another - there is simply no hope for our world.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Alec Gordon". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

This article is substantially taken from the Chaplain's homily at Morning Prayer for Sunday 15th January 2017.