

**A VISION FOR ECUMENISM:
Notes from a Presentation by Callan Slipper
At the AGM and Forum of
Churches Together in Hertfordshire**

15 MAY 2013

I think it would be good to begin meditatively and in silence, in order for us to connect with God. I am then going to read from a couple of passages from John 17, and I hope that it can be heard afresh - we need vision from God for ecumenism.

Reading from the Fourth Gospel: Jn 17:9-12 and Jn 1:20-end

The first part of this reading (Jn 17:9-12) is Jesus praying for his disciples 'that they may be one, as we are one' and to be protected in his name. At that point, nothing is said about mission. Ecumenism is about one way of living the common calling of all who follow Jesus, living according to Jesus' prayer that we may be one. Our oneness should replicate the unity of the Holy Trinity; we should be one as the Persons of the Trinity are one. Unity is sharing in God's own life.

The second part (Jn 17:20-end), where Jesus speaks about those who are to come, makes it even more clear that he is talking about unity not as a social group but as the real life of God, where his glory is experienced and known. Unity is not, at its core, about organization or doctrine or doing things; the core of it is the experience of God.

The whole thing is bound up in profound mutual love, the way in which the Father loves the Son. In perfect, infinite love, the Son is completely one with the Father. It is the total self-gift we see in Jesus dying on the cross. He was completely self-emptying. In the heart of God, in the Trinity, nothing is held back, just as with Jesus on the cross. He shows the love that the Trinity is. This means, for us by grace as it is for God in the divine nature, a life of self-giving love that is mutual.

We share the same love, the same Holy Spirit, that Jesus lives with the Father in all eternity. God in his infinite love draws us to experience the same unity. Thus the real reason for seeking unity is that it is glorious and beautiful; it is the life of God.

And there are a number of consequences that flow from this: you can deepen this life of unity by learning how to live it better, in a similar way to other deep relationships, such as with your intimacy with God in prayer or your relationship with others in intense and meaningful relationships, say, with your spouse. We can learn, be trained, improve. It is the same with our relationships with one another in God; we can learn to do them better.

Now, we all know that ecumenism works when relationships work, when there is space for friendships to develop. We should learn from this. Be a bit more savvy. Not just by giving space for relationships to grow, but working at them as we can with our other deep relationships.

There are four characteristics, for instance, of how our personal relationship with God in prayer can grow that are the same for our relationships with one another in God. These are that they should be disciplined, patterned, conscious and deliberate.

What does (1) disciplined mean? We do things according to our will, it is not just about our feelings. Real love, all real love, does include feelings, but begins in the will. This starting point takes us to the core of the Gospel: Jesus tells us to love everybody. Loving with our will means we love all without exception or exclusion.

Then (2) the pattern of this kind of love is Jesus himself. He poured himself out utterly (Phil 2:5-11) to become us, to become a human person, a genuine human being. That self-emptying love is what he asks of us. We have to love as he loves us. Thus we too have to take on board everything of one another, each other's interests, concerns, worries, joys: identify ourselves with the other. Have Jesus' quality of love.

Then (3) this must be conscious. We should be aware of what we are doing. Not loving by chance, as it were, or in some generalized fashion, with a vague sense that we ought to be nice to others. Buddhists talk of being mindful and they are right. It is a Christian virtue. We should be mindful and so aware that we do things to love the others.

Being (4) deliberate flows from this consciousness. It is a choice to serve and so serve a real way, doing things for the others in the only time we have: now. Moment by moment we have to choose and we can only love in the here and now, not a future that hasn't happened, nor in a past that has already happened.

If this powerful love, this love that requires all our human effort but is rooted in the life of God himself, is the nature of unity, that says a lot about what we mean by ecumenism. In the first place, the unity that ecumenism promotes is about our relationships with one another in God. But this also means that, as unity is the way God wants us to relate to him (that is, we are to relate to God by being one in our sharing his intimate life), unity among Christians is also the way we are to have unity with God. We ignore unity at our peril.

Historically we can see the results when we fail in unity. This is not only about the disastrous effects on our spiritual lives. The divisions among Christians lead to a counter-witness and so the world ceases to believe. The rise of secularism and indifferentist atheism can be charted according to our divisions.

St Jerome said that ignorance of scripture is ignorance of Christ. In history the life that was in Jesus has been carried on by his followers. Each Christian group, as each Christian, lives out what Jesus taught, the life he gave us. We are like words of God, spoken in Christ, and spread throughout the world. Thus if we ignore the words of God spoken among other Christians, in the life of other churches, we are not only refusing communion with them. We are refusing communion with Christ, with his words spoken in them. If we refuse communion with them, we refuse communion with him. We need ecumenism for our spiritual health.

Thus our search for Christian unity, our ecumenism, is first of all because unity makes us share in the life of God, so that God is truly present among us. With him among us we begin to see things with his eyes, we begin to have wisdom. If we want to know better how to live or understand things, we have a powerful tool by entering into unity with one another, as offer us the chance of seeing things from God's perspective.

All this, in turn, has a big impact upon mission. Our first duty is unity in God, but then, if we are living it, we have an experience of living the life God wants of us. Indeed, in communion with one another we have a genuine experience of the life Jesus came to bring. We experience the Gospel. This means that when people meet us, they meet the Gospel in action and the living community, a community with God in its midst. God himself can reach out and touch their hearts.

What is more, when we speak we do not deal in theories, telling others of things we believe but do not really know in our own lives, but we witness to our experience. The best evangelism comes from the person who speaks from experience.

All this then shapes how we approach ecumenism. It is a kind of programme. Our first priority is real unity. Thus, it is not, in the first instance, about sorting out the problems, working things out so that we can become one, but it is about being one so that we can sort out the problems. In the light of a living unity in God we can see clearly.

Unity, then, gives us the life of God, spiritual health, a genuine and effective mission (as well as the way of sorting out such difficulties as there still are between Christians). Behaving ecumenically, in relationship with one another, will help us not only achieve the goal of ecumenism, that is, the reconciliation of Christians, it will deliver an authentic Gospel life and a meaningful outreach to others.

This programme touches ecumenism locally. What I hope for in Hertfordshire is gradually to build up the core, that is, real relationships so that we learn even more to love one another, and to love one another in God. For this reason I am keen to travel round and meet groups, including those who don't want necessarily to be part of CTH. I also want to meet the LEPs and to learn what God is saying to us through them. I hope also to find out about, encourage and deepen our relationships with groups that have a missional focus, such as street pastors, food banks, debt counselling and so on, and any other places where Christians are working together. There are, also, other new groups growing up, such as community Churches, who can be brought into this broader relationship, which is vital for us and for them.

There is much to learn, and I hope to find out more about the soul of what is going on. The practical upshot will be, apart from the effect on our spiritual lives and on mission, that we can all learn from the good practice of what is going on elsewhere. Ecumenism improves the whole of our service to God.

The mission that fulfils God's dream for us is that we are truly sharing in God's life.

Questions and Answers Following the Presentation

After some discussion for a few minutes in small groups, Bishop Paul invited comments and questions. Paul Seymour said he liked this relational idea of ecumenism, which he felt he could buy into more. Callan Slipper said we need the structures to support the relationships. It is very British to be organised! Bishop Paul said that if there is a common purpose, you can stand side by side and move forward together.

Janet Bird said she thought ecumenism is working in Hertford, as there is much going on, and people want to do things such as working for the foodbank or helping out at Christmas, and it is done prayerfully and practically. They also have discussion groups at Lent. They are all working together for God, which is what they think it is about. We are all Christians.

CS agreed. When things are going well, it is because the relationships are working, just as in a marriage.

Colin Bird asked the Forum to consider the spread of best practice: some groups need help so we should share what is good amongst everybody. He asked how did CS see that working?

CS said the website will be very useful for that purpose. The role the Ecumenical Facilitator is also to help with this. He needs to be alert and put people in touch with one another, not just rely on the website and people reading it like a newsletter.

Father Shenouda said we need to focus on the basic theology, which is common to all, as the foundation of what we do.

Bishop Paul said we need to preserve the focus of local groups who know what works for them, but also share our experiences.

CS said ecumenism is really about freedom, not about something burdensome we feel we must add to the agenda because Jesus said it. Basically we are free to love one another, in the way that God wants us to, and it is good for us, it helps things to work better.

Bishop Paul observed that CS's main task is to find out what members are good at, what works for them, and what they can share.

RJA (revised and edited by CS)
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