Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2022 by The Revd Graham Earney,

23rd January 2022

1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a

Luke 4: 14-21

When I realised I was preaching in this week of prayer for Christian Unity I was led to recollect how much of my ministry has been blessed by working with others of different denominations. Of how God has blessed my efforts by the support and challenge of those with whom I have had the honour and pleasure to work.

I thought I would share with you some of the journey I have been on through those years of ministry – in the hope that you too can think of times when God has led you to work with others for the sake of His kingdom. The first thing to get clear is that this week is about seeking unity – not uniformity. There is nothing here about all being exactly the same. Nothing about there only being one way to worship, or to serve God, or proclaim our faith. Variety of practice and worship breeds understanding and the extension of the kingdom.

In chapter 12 of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul uses the analogy of the human body with all its various parts to describe the way in which the Church works. Not all parts are the same; the parts need to trust in who they are; but together they come to make up the whole. We can’t all be laity or clergy, but we can come together to share our insights and our perspectives of the gospel. Not all are called to be Anglicans, or Methodists, or Roman Catholics; but we are called to respect one another and to draw inspiration from one another.

The passage we read from Luke’s gospel recalls the time when Jesus went back to the synagogue in Nazareth and was asked to read from the prophet Isaiah. He spoke these words:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovering of sight to the blind,

to set at liberty those who are oppressed,

to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”

With the words, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” he announces his mission to those among whom he had grown up.

These words of Isaiah have always been dear to me. I have been aware of them as I have made my ecumenical pilgrimage through life. In a way this began when I worked for the Mission to Seamen, now the Mission to Seafarers, in the year before going to college. The first thing I was set to do was learn the Mission’s mission statement; To care for the physical, moral and spiritual wellbeing of seamen irrespective of nationality, colour, creed, or ethnic background. There was an openness to working alongside those from other seamen’s missions on the river Tyne.

While at college in London we had the privilege of being open to so many different influences. These included going to many different churches at weekends – of hearing great preachers like Hugh Parry Jones, who could keep his Baptist congregation enthralled for over an hour and a half – no, I will not be trying that today! Or being in St Paul’s Cathedral to hear Martin Luther King. Part of the King’s London experience was about respecting others who were clearly people of truth and of gaining insights from a variety of sources.

This continued throughout my parochial ministry, but came to the fore during my time on Tyneside. While a team vicar at Battle Hill I worked with Methodist and URC colleagues in a “Local Ecumenical Project”. Together we built the Church of the Good Shepherd, literally from the foundations up. We ministered to all during a time when unemployment went up to 33% in some parts of the estate. We hosted a mother and baby clinic for the local health authority and started a number of advice and information projects. Some months after the opening of the church there was a complaint in the Methodist Local Preachers’ meeting. Because of the number of clergy at the Good Shepherd the local preachers weren’t getting a chance to preach in the new church building.

This led to both the Anglican Reader and I being recognised by the Methodist Church so we would take services throughout the Circuit to allow the local preachers their chance to go to the Good Shepherd.

In parallel to our building the church locally there was a national campaign, “Not Strangers but Pilgrims” which sought a new way forward from the old British Council of Churches. Local meetings fed into national ones and finally a grand conference in September 1987 at Swanwick. This was attended by over thirty denominations from Britain and Ireland. I was invited as one of the Anglican representatives. Throughout a collegial approach was adopted, with the majority of the discussion/work done in smallish groups. These fed into plenary sessions so that something from each group ended up in the final document agreed by all. If I may be forgiven one piece of ‘name-dropping’ – I was scribe and raconteur for the group chaired by Monseigneur Vincent Nichols, now the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster.

After work in the diocese of Bath & Wells, quite a bit of it with an ecumenical flavour, I came to Hereford Diocese in 1995. My previous exploits were remembered and with the permission of the then Bishop of Ludlow I again took Methodist services regularly in the Ludlow Circuit.

Around the same time the plans from Swanwick 1987 were accepted nationally, with the creation of Churches Together in England. Again I was privileged in that I was asked to chair the group who drew up the constitution and created “Churches Together Around Ludlow”. One of the Quakers, with a bent for carpentry, created a model of a multi-faceted ‘tabernacle’ with one face for each of participating church. It put in tangible form what we had being trying to say in the new constitution – all churches were a part and each one was needed to make up the whole.

All that may seem far from the situation in our benefice. The buildings of other denominations have gone, or have been turned into private houses. But that should not stop us from trying to be ecumenical. We can, and do offer the open hand of friendship to those of different traditions. We do share, at least in part, a Sunday lectionary to that used in other denominations. Our hymn books are an assembly of hymns and songs from various sources and traditions. The orders of service which we use have more similarity with those used elsewhere than perhaps we would want to admit.

So this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we pray for all those with whom we have so much in common. We pray that we may support each other prayerfully through the coming days. We pray that God will bless our ministries as we respect and bless the ministries of others.

The Revd Graham Earney