

January 19th, 2014

St Mary's Kidlington



Revd Mervyn Puleston on *The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2014*

When I was a boy during the war we lived in a seven bedroomed, draughty Shropshire vicarage, with no gas or electricity, not far away from a large RAF training base. Because we had such a large house we had people from the base billeted on us. My parents came from a very protestant background, and one day we were told by the billeting officer that we were to receive a new family, they turned out to be Roman Catholics. As small children we were not sure what Roman Catholics were; they were clearly strange creatures, and a bit foreign, and the slightly hushed conversations at table, which parents think children will either not hear or not understand, gave the impression that we were about to receive some rather alien human beings. I am glad to say that later on in life my mother lived opposite a convent and often had the nuns to tea.

When I was first ordained and in my new parish, I happened to meet a Salvation Army officer on the corner of the High Street in Marlow, he had also recently arrived in the area. The following Sunday an elderly member of the congregation said, as she was coming out of the church, I saw you speaking to that young Salvation Army Captain last week, my father, who was vicar here in 1900 told one of his curates off for doing the same thing, telling him that he should not associate with dissenters. I am still friends with him I am glad to say, and he is now ecumenical officer in the diocese of St. Albans. She also told me that one of the curates fell in love with the Methodist minister's daughter, they lived on the other side of Marlow bridge. When the vicar heard of this liaison he strictly forbade the young man to cross bridge to see her. Later it came to his notice that the young man was still seeing her. On having him on the mat and saying that he had been forbidden to cross the bridge, he assured the vicar that he had obeyed the order, and was using a boat to cross the river.

There is a story of a rural vicar at the beginning of the last century, who was approached by a Baptist, who lived in the village, asking him whether he would be prepared to take the funeral of his wife, who had recently died, as there was no minister near enough to take the service. Not being sure of the rules about this sort of thing he sent a telegram to his Bishop "May I bury a Baptist?" Back came the reply, "You may bury the lot."

We know that the history of the church is not always a happy one, especially in the 16th century and onwards. The Reformation was a time of great upheaval and the church was divided between Protestant and Catholic. Many people were martyred for their beliefs, and three of them were prominent Bishops commemorated in Oxford by the Martyr's Memorial, Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley, burnt at the stake in Broad Street under Queen Mary, Bloody Mary as she became known. Her successor and half sister Elizabeth was more tolerant, but even under her many Catholics, mainly priests, were tortured and executed. Especially by Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth's spy master who regarded them as agents of the Spanish. In France in 1572 took place the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre when many thousand of protestants were killed at the orders of the king, but really as a result of his mother Catherine of Medici's influence over him. Many protestants, Huguenots, fled to Holland and this country. Our own civil war too was partly fought over religious as well as political issues.

Although by the 18th and 19th Century we longer persecuted people for their faith there were laws that prevented non-Anglicans from holding certain offices and attending the Ancient Universities, or hold high offices.

This is the week of prayer for Christian Unity, and things have changed a good deal since those days.

For some years I was chaplain in Geneva, which as you probably know was very much one of the centres of the Reformation, John Calvin who lived there was one of the leaders of the Reformation and John Knox escaping from Mary, who was also there, came under his influence and took back many of his ideas to his native Scotland.

Until the Reformation, Geneva had been ruled by a Prince Bishop and was part of the Kingdom of Savoy. When Geneva decided to unite with Switzerland and cede from Savoy the Duke tried to regain this part of his kingdom. On December 11th 1602 he sent his troops in during the night to scale the walls and recapture the city. However an elderly lady called Madame Royame was making a stew, a Marmite as it is called in French, she lived on the walls of the city and suddenly spotted a Savoyard soldier on a ladder outside her window, grabbing the stew pot she threw the boiling contents of the of her marmite over the soldiers, and the resulting shout roused the the city to arms and the invasion was repelled. Still every year this event is celebrated with people dressed in 17th century costume, parading round old city, ending with a bonfire in the cathedral square.

Afterwards people have an Escalade supper and at the end a chocolate marmite, which you see in all the shops, is smashed by the old and youngest member of the company holding hands and everyone shouts "Ainsi peris toutes les enemies de le republic," the enemy being the Pope. In Lewes, in Sussex, the pope is still burned in effigy on bonfire night.

Now Geneva is the headquarters of the World Council of Churches. It had its own building not very far from the old League of Nations building, which is now part of the UN and where much international negotiations take place.

The historical roots of the World Council of Churches are found in the student and lay movements of the late 19th and early 20th century, the 1910 Edinburgh world missionary conference, and a 1920 encyclical from the (Orthodox) Synod of Constantinople suggesting a "fellowship of churches" similar to the League of Nations. Leaders representing more than 100 churches voted in 1937-38 to found a World Council of Churches, but its inauguration was delayed following the outbreak of the second world war and it finally came into being in 1948.

After the war, the Council encouraged churches' development ministries and continues this work among refugees, migrants and the poor. During the cold war, the WCC provided a forum for East-West dialogue. In 1961 the International Missionary Council merged with the WCC, giving the Council an enlarged agenda in world mission and evangelism. The Programme to Combat Racism, although controversial, assisted in ending apartheid in southern Africa. A landmark document, Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (1982) provided some theological consensus among churches in the quest for full Christian unity.

The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It is a community of churches on the way to visible unity in one faith and one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ. It seeks to advance towards this unity, as Jesus prayed for his followers, "so that the world may believe." (John 17:21)

The World Council of Churches is the broadest and most inclusive among the many organized expressions of the modern ecumenical movement, a movement whose goal is Christian unity. In the UK there is the Churches together in Britain and they encourage ecumenical activities and particularly the week of prayer. In Kidlington we have daily prayers in different churches and an ecumenical meal with a speaker. In Blackbird Leys where I was vicar for six years we were one of the first ecumenical churches in the country sharing the church, the worship and the ministry.

The WCC now brings together 349 churches, denominations and church fellowships in more than 110 countries and territories throughout the world, representing over 560 million Christians and including most of the world's Orthodox churches, scores of Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist and Reformed

churches, as well as many United and Independent churches. While the bulk of the WCC's founding churches were European and North American, today most member churches are in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Middle East and the Pacific.

For its member churches, the WCC is a unique space: one in which they can reflect, speak, act, worship and work together, challenge and support each other, share and debate with each other. As members of this fellowship, WCC member churches:

- are called to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one Eucharistic fellowship;
- promote their common witness in work for mission and evangelism;
- engage in Christian service by serving human need, breaking down barriers between people, seeking justice and peace, and upholding the integrity of creation; and
- foster renewal in unity, worship, mission and service.

We live in a divided world, as Christians we should be concerned that the church should be an instrument of unity, peace and reconciliation. The closer we are to Christ the closer we will be to each other. Promoting Christian unity is not just something for “Ecumaniacs.”

Unity does not of course mean uniformity, and there are multitude of forms of worship, from the elaborate to the simple, from High Mass with bells, smells and incense, to a simple Quaker meeting.

But what we all hold in common is that Jesus Christ came into the world to show us how mankind should live, and that he is the unique expression of God's love for us.

I don't think there can be a better prayer for unity than prayer of St. Francis.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

to be consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand;

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

Mervin Puleston