

“THAT THEY ALL MAY BE ONE”

Sermon preached on the third Sunday after Epiphany, 22 January 2023, at Christ’s Church Cathedral, Hamilton, Ontario, by Bishop Terry Brown. Readings: Isaiah 9: 1-4, 1 Corinthians 1: 10-18 and Matthew 4:12-23.

May I preach in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We hear much about the church as “missional” these days: that as Christians we are invited into God’s mission of love and justice in the world in the coming of Jesus Christ. More and more we structure parishes, dioceses and even national churches around, quite properly, *Missio Dei*, God’s mission in the world, into which we are invited (or even compelled) to participate in creative ways, reaching out in solidarity wherever God’s presence already is, or where it is more concretely needed.

But sometimes we forget one aspect of being missional. Mission is *ecumenical*: that the whole household of God, *oikumene*, all churches together, are called to working together and ultimately to unity. The key biblical passage, adopted by many Christian ecumenical organizations and united churches, is John 17: 21, from Jesus’s high priestly prayer as he is about to go to Gethsemane; Jesus prays that his disciples in the future may live in unity: “I pray that they all may be one.” In today’s Gospel, the disciples Peter, Andrew, James and John, are called by a single Jesus, to a common ministry and to unity with him and one another. So, in the upper room, Jesus prays that they and all future disciples, including ourselves, may live in that same unity. Thus, the whole household of God, all churches whatever their denomination, are called by and to a single Christ, to unity with God and with one another. Already, God’s mission is towards unity, and we are invited (indeed, some would say, compelled) to join in ecumenical relationships and ministry.

However, from the earliest church, there were divisions. We read about some of them in today’s Epistle from 1 Corinthians. Different leaders have emerged, each with their set of followers, and chaos has erupted. “I follow Apollos.” “I follow Peter.” “I follow Paul.” And even, “I follow Christ.” Paul will have none of it and writes,

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.

Over centuries, great divisions in the church have developed, divisions that are still present today. Would it be too great a leap to say that today the divisions might be expressed by “I belong to Cranmer (or perhaps Canterbury).” “I belong to Luther.” “I belong to the pope.” “I belong to the Ecumenical Patriarch,” or even, “I belong to Christ (and you don’t)?” But Paul’s appeal still holds: “[let] there be no divisions among you, but ... be perfectly united in mind and thought.”

Yet, also over the centuries, mindful of Jesus' prayer "that they all may be one" and Paul's appeal for unity, there have been creative actions towards church unity: for example, the missionary movement, where isolated Christians of different denominations were forced to work together to preach a single Gospel; the ecumenical movement, around the strands of Faith and Order, and Life and Work, which eventually resulted in the formation of the World Council of Churches and national councils of churches; the re-uniting of divided churches and the formation of united churches, in places as different as India and Canada; post-denominational Christianity in post-Revolutionary China; the Second Vatican Council, in which the Roman Catholic Church opened itself to other churches in a new way; and movements of full communion between two or more denominations, such as the Anglican Church of Canada has with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

We are in the middle of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which runs between the Confession St. Peter (last Wednesday) and the Conversion of St. Paul (next Wednesday), so it is only appropriate that we reflect on ecumenism – its biblical basis, and our successes and failures, looking towards the future.

Some have described the current ecumenical scene as a kind of "ecumenical winter." Why? Let me briefly suggest four reasons and make some suggestions of how we might better participate in God's *Ecumenical* Mission in the world.

(1) The ecumenical movement was very strong in the sixties and seventies, encouraged by Roman Catholic participation after the Second Vatican Council, but, after a while, for some there was fear that changes were too sudden, and they retreated into denominational identities and became more conservative. Conservative popes did not help, and divisions in our own church also did not help.

(2) As numbers have declined in the last few decades, and survival comes into play, more and more energy is spent internally, keeping parishes alive, ensuring they have good and viable ministries. As more and more clergy have become part time, clergy energy has gone into the parish rather than relations with other Christians. That was my experience as a part-time rector for seven years in a parish not far from here. Only once in those seven years did we manage joint worship with the nearby Roman Catholic Church, although for several years we had a built-in ecumenical relationship with an Ethiopian Orthodox Church who worshipped in the parish hall and sometimes in our main worship space. In such a context, ecumenism becomes an added extra rather than essential. One casualty of this situation has been regular ecumenical meetings of local clergy, for friendship and mutual support, if nothing else. There is just not enough time.

(3) Sometimes ecumenism takes place at "the top," so to speak: international ecumenical consultations, World Council of Churches Assemblies, General Synods with resolutions about mutual recognition of sacraments and ministries – but "trickle down" ecumenism does not work any better than "trickle down" economics. We have a very close institutional relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, we frequently use

their Eucharistic liturgies at our altar, their bishops participate in our episcopal consecrations – but when was the last time we entered into mutual fellowship and ministry with the ELCIC parish a few blocks from us? Would it be too strong to say that sometimes on the local level we live in “denominational silos?”

(4) Finally, there is the whole issue of denominational pride and competition. Many (perhaps most) of us are proud to be Anglicans: we love our liturgy, polity, music, tradition, flexibility, creativity, or whatever. Some of us (myself included) have come from other denominations that we perhaps still regard with certain suspicions and perhaps bad memories. We also live in a culture that values competition. Even our own parishes have a tendency sometimes to compete with one another. We want the Anglicans to win the race. Yet, ultimately, such denominational pride, which can easily turn into chauvinism, is not a fundamental part of God’s Mission. We may think we do not need other Christian denominations and we can do it all alone, but Jesus’s call is to friendship and unity with *all* Christians (indeed, all of humanity), even if it makes us uncomfortable. In truth, such friendship and unity will enrich our lives.

One of the major insights of the Ecumenical Movement, which may be helpful, is the Lund Principle, formulated at the World Council of Churches Faith and Order meeting in Lund, Sweden, in 1952: that “Christians should act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately.” There are many areas of ministry around us where that principle might be applied.

So, on the positive side, what can we do locally, particularly as a cathedral congregation. Let me make five very brief suggestions:

(1) We can try to be more mindful of working ecumenically in all areas of our ministries, especially in our neighbourhood. That means reaching out, getting to know the other churches that surround us. I am sure that some ecumenical ministry already happens. I am sure there could be more. There are many churches around us who might become our friends.

(2) Ecumenical worship can be very powerful. Now that Covid is lifting, opportunities are emerging for ecumenical worship and there is no reason why we cannot sometimes host ecumenical worship with our neighbours. The Women’s World Day of Prayer is one such powerful example.

(3) One reason clergy are not more ecumenical is that they do not have enough time. Perhaps clergy time might be freed up and clergy sent out to build relationships with neighbouring clergy and parishes. But such relationships can move beyond the clergy, for example, to choirs and choir exchanges, or ecumenical study groups. The Dean shared with us at the early service that there are such ecumenical efforts underway.

(4) We shouldn’t assume that ecumenical relationships are impossible because the differences are now too great. Friendship can bridge these differences. Women clergy, women

bishops, GLTBQ+ acceptance and marriage, and ethnic differences and customs are not necessarily communion breakers. Despite the sometimes controversial stances of our church, our Primate continues to be part of the official international Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue and was the acting Co-Chair when they met with the pope last year. In my previous parish, I found our differences did not much affect our relations with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the most conservative of the Oriental Orthodox churches.

(5) Finally, it is important to include the ecumenical component in our theology. Some used to think that “mission” was an “added extra” to the life of the church, just for those who were interested in it. We now realize that it is at the heart of Christianity. So it is with ecumenism. It is not just some special interest of a few—but is at the heart of God’s Mission in the world, bringing *all* Christians into unity with one another, correcting the scandal of the divided Body of Christ.

Let us not be part of the “ecumenical winter” but part of the new “ecumenical spring.” A verse of Isaiah from this morning’s first lesson is relevant. Speaking of the future Messianic reign, Isaiah remarks, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. *You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy.*”

“You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy.” Surely that is what God’s ecumenical mission in the world, and our participation in it, is all about: new friendships, new relationships, indeed, new joy. May God give us the commitment and strength to pursue that ecumenical vocation.