

Archbishop's Sermon at Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral

Sunday 27 January 2008

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams gave a sermon at Vespers to mark the centenary of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Reading: Acts 4.32—35

About 1600 years ago there were two monks living in the Egyptian desert. They were old men who had grown old in the service of God together, singing psalms together, keeping silence together and all their long lives in the desert they never quite happened upon how the rest of the world worked. And one day one of them said to the other, 'Let's try and find out what it feels like to be a worldly person'.

'Alright said the other, how do we do that?'

'Well,' said the first, 'I'll put this stone on the ground and I say this is mine. And then you say, no it's not! It is mine. And I say, no it is not! It is mine'. So they solemnly put a stone on the ground and the first one said, 'This stone is mine'.

And the second one said, 'Alright then'.

Once in a while it helps us remember that the habits of the world are not, after all, all that natural. We have to learn to be really inquisitive, really competitive, really violent, because God has made us to live in common. Those two old monks knew about unity in a way that probably very few of us do. When you view unity, it is not just a vague common mind, having the same sort of ideas about things: they knew that unity was the instant instinctive willingness to share. 'The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul. No one claimed for his own anything that he had.' As soon as St Luke tells us about unity in the Church; he tells us about that willingness to share.

And perhaps, in the last hundred years of the ecumenical movement, that is one of the lessons we have very slowly begun to learn. In past ages, it has been all too easy – hasn't it? – for different groups of Christians and different Christian individuals to behave as the two monks thought in a worldly way. 'This truth is mine.' 'Christ is mine.. 'No he's not, he's mine.' 'No he's not, he's mine.' And slowly over this last century we've begun to understand that Christ is never a possession; or that if Christ *is* a possession, he is a possession to be *shared*. If we ever presume to say, and we probably shouldn't, that Christ was ours, then as soon as we said it we would know that Christ was to be shared. That is what is meant by unity. And so perhaps we've begun to realise in this last century, not that the riches and splendours and resources of each of our traditions is somehow an embarrassment, something that we ought to leave behind so that we can find the lowest common denominator; instead, we have begun to realise that those riches and resources are there to be given, because if they're from God, they're there to be *given*. God's gifts

always cry out to be given – they won't just sit still in our hands. And when we learn as Christian individuals, as Christian families and traditions, that the first task in building unity is sharing Christ with each other, then perhaps again, as St Luke reminds us, we have begun, like the Apostles, to give effective testimony to the resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus' resurrection was described in the New Testament in terms borrowed from the Psalms, 'Christ rises and ascends to heaven. He draws captives set free from bondage to self and sin and from the heavenly heights he pours out gifts.' Christ

goes to the heavenly places so that he can give himself to us more and more freely. So that as he breathes out the Holy Spirit upon us, life may boil and bubble and boil over in our hearts and minds: the gift that won't sit still, and demands to be shared with others. When we Christians are sharing Christ with one another, he testifies to the divine gift that is the resurrection: endless life, poured into our hearts, the life of God himself, which is always boiling over in love towards the other, which is boiling over and diffusing itself for all eternity in the life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. So if that life is really coming to life in *us*, if the resurrection is really happening and the Spirit is really healing, then we should be *sharers of Christ*. I'm suggesting a way of understanding our riches. The riches we are given – the devotion, the wisdom and the reflection – are there to be offered to one another saying, 'might this be a dimension of the glory of Christ?'

Of course there is another side of the coin. If we understand the gift of Christ in that way, and the riches of Christ's giving in us, then we also have to realise our *poverty*. 'I want to offer Christ to you.' As soon as I have said that, I have to acknowledge my poverty, and long for you to offer Christ to me because I need *your* riches in *my* poverty. None of us has yet so understood Christ that the story has come to an end and there is nothing more to find out – God help us if we ever think that – and that means that in our relations as individual Christians, and as Christian families and traditions, we come with that awareness of both riches and of poverty.

A hundred years ago, our different Christian families and professions perhaps believed, even if they didn't quite put it like this, that they didn't have much to learn from each other, that basically 'they' had to learn from 'us' if anything. Slowly that has changed and is still changing and (please God) it will go on changing. It requires confidence and humility alike, a mixture that is very difficult to get right if you hadn't noticed. It requires confidence and gratitude – yes Christ has blessed us! – that in the history of our churches he has given us enormous riches, glory and joy, wisdom and insight; he has given us stories of sacrifice and heroism, examples of human lives wonderfully lived. We begin with gratitude for all of that, and yet in the same moment we say to ourselves that all the riches of our history, all that Christ has brought to life in us, is but a *tiny* part of the great truth of Christ which is to bring us all into the endless joy, bliss and self-giving of his own relationship to his eternal Father in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And so we turn eagerly, and I am almost tempted to say greedily, to one another saying 'Tell us what do you know.' Do we as Christians approach one another – let's not say with greediness – but that eagerness, saying first and foremost, 'What can you tell me about Christ?' Because again unity grows when we are aware of that *hunger* to know more about Christ. We grow together in unity as we share, and as we come to one another with open hands. 'None of their members is ever in want', says St Luke about the early Church, and that is quite a challenging thought. Heaven knows it is a challenging thought about how, practically, we can meet each others needs in the Church and the world. Heaven knows it is a reproach to a lazy and selfish Church, and you can't always say *that*

to Christian communities. Pressing to that deeper level of meaning – 'None of their members was ever in want.' – what I needed to know; who Christ was, what Christ had to give, and somebody else to tell me. Would my Christian community – my Christian Church – need to be recalled to the depth of discipleship? There was another Christian family ready to help. And so unity, unity for which we pray, the unity to which we're all committed, that is the unity that depends on both hunger and generosity, on that sense of a gift that is given to us that won't sit still. It is always a life reaching out into the life of another and receiving from the other. That's the nature of any Christian community. And when we turn to the confused and often quarrelsome worldwide families of historic Churches, when we look at all the different traditions and confessions that make up the Christian spectrum today, we need to see something of that reaching out and receiving reflected in that worldwide family as well as we come to one another gratefully and humbly. We come to one another rejoicing in what we have been given, eager to give it, and hungry to learn and be fed by one another.

That of course is why, finally, our division at the Lord's Table is so big. There are no quick answers to it; there are no short cuts to solve the problems. What we cannot piece together, we can look towards that table and say, that is the place where as we meet, sharing with one another the resurrection, the life of Christ is renewed in us. That is where the life in every Christian community has its centre, from which it draws its energy. That is why it is so tragic that we cannot be there together, and that is why it is so important that we pray and work with one another, ceaselessly in prayer, so that we may come to that place where we are fed and nourished by each other in Christ's company, more deeply fed together by Christ in his risen life and in his body and blood. 'The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul. No one claimed for his own needs anything that he had as everything they owned was held in common.' 'Well,' says St Paul, 'what do you have that you did not receive? All that you have you have received, and what you have received is the risen life of Christ.' He readily defined that unity which is sharing the gift and hunger and rejoicing in one another. May God bring us together to the banquet of our

Lord Jesus Christ in heaven; may God feed us day by day by the living bread that comes down from heaven; and may God give us afresh to one another in joy and thanksgiving. Amen.

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