

Anglicans Together Dinner

It is a great privilege to be with you this evening. It seemed to me that to address a group called 'Anglicans Together' almost inevitably invites a speaker to address the nature of Christian unity. And as an Anglican who has worshipped and served in reformed, charismatic and Anglo-Catholic churches, Christian unity is a topic to which I have inevitably given more thought than I might otherwise have done.

As I do, the questions that I ask are inevitably three-fold and I thought that I might touch on each this evening. My first question is why unity might matter, the second is the source of our unity and why Christians disagree so often, and the third is how we should live when Christians disagree. The first question has to be important because there are, apparently around 33,000 Christian denominations with an increase every year of between 270 and 300 new ones. If Christian unity is important, and even given the difference between denominational unity and unity of the faith, the statistics do not necessarily suggest that we are doing a fabulous job of maintaining it. The second question flows from the first, because to achieve unity and to deal with disagreement, we must understand their source. The third question is important because there is simply so much about which Christians have, from the very beginning disagreed.

Well, there are, of course, many reasons why unity is important, and you will doubtless have heard speakers far more theologically learned than me address them. But I want to draw on some verses from Philippians to think about the importance of unity in the context of Christian mission.

"Whatever happens," writes Paul, "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God."

There are, as you will know, endless Australian sociologies of religion. But on coming home to Australia after twenty years away, the first thing that really strikes you is that this is both a profoundly religious, but also a profoundly secular, country. There is no doubt that people have a vague sense of the numinous and often a kind of folk Christianity or a fashionable Buddhism. But this is also an extraordinarily wealthy country, in which life for a very long time has been rather good, and it can often feel as if the mall has replaced the Cathedral and Westfield is the denomination to which most people adhere.

In this context being a Christian can be a very odd experience indeed. It can feel like selling life jackets on the Titanic while the music is playing, the children are tucked up in bed and the ship is quietly steaming through the Atlantic darkness. You know that what you have found to be true is very important and that the world must stop to listen, but so often you encounter only polite indifference.

You know that what you have found and has changed your life, cries out to be shared with others, but so many are frankly just not interested. There are, of course, times when you remember that you are part of great international community of belief, an enormous and diverse community, a community with a history of two thousand years. But often you have the experience that I have every Good Friday when we come out of church having celebrated the central moment in the history of the cosmos and I realise that most people just see the day as another one on which to shop. Like their European counterparts, Australian Christians increasingly live as minorities of belief in a population that waivers between indifference and anger at the things in its past for which, rightly or wrongly, it blames the church.

So how do we live and how do we witness in that context? What will convince the world of the truth of the gospel and be a sign to them of our salvation? Paul, in this reading from Philippians, gives us a clue. Paul knew what it meant to live in a minority faith. At the time of writing Philippians he was in a gaol for his preaching, writing letters to his struggling congregations, eager to see that they were holding on for the gospel. He knew what it was like to live in a world that was indifferent and even hostile to his message of salvation.

But before we look at what Paul has to say, I want to look at a way in which I think we are tempted, but ought not, to respond to our situation. I think we are tempted to a strategy of withdrawal. In Philippians 1:28, Paul talks about being “intimidated by your opponents”. The word that he uses here is a very unusual word that refers to the uncontrollable stampede of frightened horses. When there is opposition our temptation is to run. Now of course there are different ways of running. For Christians in the modern west, running often entails withdrawal into our own communities. We are tempted to spend all of our time with other Christians or in church activities. How much more secure we feel at yet another church meeting than in trying to be an ambassador for Christ in the community. And in this process of withdrawal, argument with other Christians can serve a very particular purpose. It can serve the purpose of drawing circles of exclusion so that we refuse to deal with this or that person who disagrees with us and build for ourselves cosier and cosier coterie of the like minded, places to which we retreat to feel safe. Withdrawal into arguing with ourselves and drawing circles of exclusion seems like a safe way of dealing with the indifference and opposition of the world. And there is endless fodder for argument: anyone who has ever been part of a Christian congregation knows the creative and dynamic capacity that the average congregation has for disagreement and the amount of spleen that it can enjoy spending and gouging out of others.

However, Paul’s answer to the problem of living in a Christian minority could not be more different. Paul calls on us to reject this temptation to withdraw. He repudiates our willingness to use disagreement to create safety zones of exclusion. We are, he tells us in Philippians 1:27, to stand firm in one spirit and to strive side by side with one mind for the sake of the gospel. We are to stand together in unity and our unity will bear witness to the world of our salvation. In saying this, Paul echoes the theme of the great high-priestly prayer of Jesus when he says:

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of all those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be [and here some manuscripts repeat the word ‘one’] in us, so that the world might believe.” (John 17:20-21)

That which will make the world take notice, that which will proclaim the greatness of God and the glory of his salvation is the church standing united for the gospel. We are not to retreat, but to stand together as one. If we don't, if we accept divided local fellowships as normal and world-wide divisions as standard then, as Motyer says, we cannot wonder why the church is steadily withdrawing from the opposing world!

I want to explore this idea of standing in Christian unity further. In particular, I want to ask my second and third questions. Where does our unity come from? Why do we disagree so much? And if our unity in the gospel is that which bears witness to the world, what happens when Christians do honestly disagree: not using disagreement to create zones of exclusion, but honestly differing in their understanding of God's mind for a particular situation?

As for the source of our unity, it flows, of course, from our experience of the salvation of a God who is three in one and who, as Jesus prays He will, is drawing us into the perfect unity of his own life. This point stands out clearly in the opening verse of Philippians Chapter 2. "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose." The order here, "Christ ... love .. Spirit" is the same as that of the Trinitarian 'grace' in 2 Corinthians 13:14: "May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." Indeed, the concluding phrase of these two passages, "fellowship of the Holy Spirit", is almost identical. The point is that we have encouragement because we are already "in Christ" through his saving work; that we know the love of the Father which has been made poured out for us through the cross; and that the result of our reconciliation with God in Christ is a new life in the Spirit. We have all experienced this one salvation through the one gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and are being drawn by God's Spirit into sharing the community that he has known with the Father and the Son from before all time. Our unity has been achieved in the death and resurrection of Jesus. No wonder that unity is powerful. No wonder the world should see it and recognise that it is the product of salvation. No wonder that the world should see it and believe. The unity of Christians becomes as much the result of the work of Christ as their righteousness and the world has a right to see

both as evidence of the reconciling work of God. Unity is not homogeneity, the bible makes that clear in many places, it is rather the shared condition of those who have been set free by Christ and are growing into the family likeness.

But if this is the case, then why do Christians disagree? Why do we find it so hard to 'be in full accord and of one mind' in the way that Paul urges us to be? Is disagreement always the enemy of Christian unity? And how ought we to behave when we do disagree?

Disagreements amongst Christians seem to be of two kinds. We can disagree about our preferences (one person likes orchestral music for worship and another likes folk guitar). But we can also disagree about issues of morality and doctrine (one person believes that women should wear hats in church and another does not).

I think that both these types of disagreement arise from our current limitations. As for questions of preference, we often lack the perspective to see the good in things that other people enjoy. In the new creation, of course, we shall be able to appreciate all that God has made and that is good. We shall also have endless time and resources, so if a part of our differences are that we still have preferences for particular types of music, we will have all the time in the world to enjoy all the different types and shall even enjoy deferring to the preferences of others. The one thing that is clear in the here and now is that differences of preference should never be allowed to put a barrier between Christians: differences of preference are never a reason to break fellowship. They are barely even a reason to change churches.

Differences of morality and doctrine are, of course, more troubling. But again they arise from our current limitations. Christians disagree about these issues because of the nature of Christian truth and our access to it in a fallen world. For Christians, Jesus is truth. That is what he tells us in John 14:6. The way to truth is encounter with the mind of Christ and growing minds more Christlike ourselves. This claim that Jesus is truth and that the way to truth is encounter with him, is modelled in the form of our Bible. Most of the Bible is not propositional in nature. It does not involve the doling out of timeless truths in predigested packages. Rather, it tells story after story of people who encountered God and were changed, and encourages us to find God

in those stories and to learn to see the world in the way that he does. Some of that material is very difficult. But the more that we are saturated in those stories and the more that in prayer and with the help of the Holy Spirit we come to find the living God, the more we come to understand the truth. Of course, even at our best we will see through a glass darkly until we know as we are known, but we can grow in the mind of Christ and that will be to grow in truth. The one mind that Paul hopes that we share is the one mind of Christ.

Disagreement around issues of morality and doctrine sometimes arises between honest and Bible centred Christians, not because they fail in their commitment to learning the mind of Christ but because, as we learn this mind in different contexts and at different rates and from different perspectives, we will inevitably come to understand some things slightly differently. Of course there will be material, the core of the Gospel, about which we will all agree. But there will be other issues about which very thoughtful, Bible-centred, spirit-filled, praying Christians will disagree. And if these Christians are willing to listen to one another and each is willing to see how God is working in other people's lives as well as her own, then disagreement can be a way, not of drawing circles of exclusion, but of moving all our understandings of God and his purposes further on. In this way, disagreement becomes not a source of disunity but of working things out until we can together express our unity that Christ achieved on the cross.

To do this, however, to listen hard and to pray hard and to love hard those with whom we disagree about a particular issue, takes great humility, particularly if we are committed to finding truth and therefore open to admitting that we have been wrong. And this is why, in Philippians 2, Paul calls us, not only to count others better than ourselves, but to focus on Jesus, who "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." If together we can focus on Jesus and if we can listen to one another and to him with the humility that looks first to the interests of the other, then there is chance that our communities will be marked by the scent of that unity which binds together the Trinity and which is our most powerful weapon as we stand together against a hostile and indifferent world.

This will mean that sometimes, for the sake of unity, we have to give up a point, even one about which we feel quite strongly. It will mean looking for the truth and not the error in what other people have to say. It will mean giving up manipulative weapons such as the continual threat that "If my church does X or Y then I will leave". It will mean accepting that sometimes my church does things with which I personally disagree. It will mean that when a particular disagreement is so fundamental that we believe it does entail breaking fellowship with a particular group that in other respects we would identify as Christian, we do so not with relish or in anger, but with tears, with great care and with unceasing prayer for the good of those with whom we disagree.

In the process of learning the humility to disagree well, I believe that we have more chance of together finding the mind of Christ. And I know from my reading of Philippians that we have more chance of winning Australia for Him.

So I would here at your annual dinner strongly encourage you in your goal of bringing Anglicans Together and pray that, as you do so, the family likeness of Philippians 2 may ever more clearly be seen in this country. If the world can see in us 'that mind which was in Christ Jesus' - even, and perhaps especially when we disagree - then I believe that it will hasten the day at which, every knee [shall] bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Amen