

## SERMON FOR EPIPHANY 3

24 January 2010

You may remember that it was rather cold on Wednesday evening. But in my diary was invitation to attend a light supper with other local Church leaders, to mark the *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*. So, well wrapped up against the cold and armed with a Google map I walked down, past Clare and Emma Walker's house in Canonbury, until I reached 'The Bridge', the HQ of the Baptist community on the Marquis estate.

As you do on those occasions, I tried to talk to people I'd not met before and quite soon I was talking to David, leader of the Ichthus Christian Fellowship in Holloway, part of the New Wine network. Some years older than me, his story was not un-interesting as he told me how he had resigned the Methodist ministry to take up his present role and how he had sat in on some big meetings of 'Christians Together in England' as a Free Church observer. So, over the bhajis and orange juice I asked him whether he felt more or less encouraged about the possibility of visible unity between the churches in the future: would the financial pressures on every Church community mean that, before very long, we would find churches combining on a much more radical scale than we had seen in the past?

His answer was a real wake-up call to me, gently mixing in traditional church circles! He started talking about the style of many of the newer house church communities, rooted in the belief that they shouldn't be buying property because they expected Jesus and his Second Coming, any time soon. David went on to describe their Sunday worship which might involve some or all of the following: painting out graffiti on local high-rise flats, organising drop-in bins for knives and needles, doing the shopping for the elderly or house-bound, painting a banner for a Christian rally or drinking coffee together as they discussed the headlines in that day's newspapers. He was blunt: he reminded me that they would find any of the things we are doing here as totally mystifying, alien and incomprehensible.

The front of the Times yesterday showed pictures of the estate in Doncaster where the two young boys lived, the ones who had been responsible for the quite appalling attack on other children recently. It was a clever picture and, I'm afraid, it took me right back to the tough estates that I have known over the years in the north. Right at

the centre of the picture was a battered red sofa, dumped in a pool of mud and unkempt grass that passed for someone's back garden. Alongside there was a depressing list of the day to day features of the lives those young men had put up with, including frequent domestic violence, drug taking and the breakdown of any kind of personal care. There too were the comments about the way the local authority had handled this case, the number of visits that had been made by social workers and their summary of what should be done with these 'rather naughty boys'.

It was a catalogue of despair: of too little being done, too late. As various voices have been saying recently, our society seems to be paying the price now for having tried to handle these very difficult situations 'at arms length', with minimal contact, somehow hoping that the balloon wouldn't go up on our watch.

So when I heard on Wednesday of the social outreach being done by some of the new House Church communities I could not but be impressed. The amount of time they spend among young people – out on the streets as well as in local schools (like the City of London Academy next door) is spectacular.

On Friday I went to a quite different meeting – this time at King's College London, for a day long seminar on the importance of the Eucharist, of the Mass, in the life of the Church today. Some of the talks were academic enough to make my head spin! But at the end there was an hour long series of slides which pointed up the way in which the various parts of our Mass could resonate with the world outside our Church walls. It was extremely well done by the Head of Duke Seminary in Durham, North Carolina, Sam Wells. I have only time to share one of his comments with you but it was the one remark that made the most impact on me during the day.

And it was simply this: during the slide showing someone reading in Church he said: *we need everyone to be in Church when we are listening to the Word of God because without their insights we are unable to really hear the Scriptures in all their complexity.*

And these were among the examples he gave: we need Egyptians here to understand the sense of slavery experienced by the people before Moses got them released via the Red Sea; we need teenage unmarried mums to help us understand what it felt like for Mary to hear the news of her pregnancy as in Luke's Gospel; we need to have

people who have been in prison to truly understand what it must have been like for Peter to have been released from goal as we read in Acts... .

The point was: we need everyone.

But 'everyone' is such a vast concept for as soon as we go beyond just me, myself, we are into difficult debates about how things should be run, who takes responsibility and who sets priorities. But that is where this second reading comes into its own for we then see that St Paul is saying exactly the same thing as Sam Wells – or possibly the other way round! Within this 'whole body' image that Paul chooses to offer us, we can't all be eyes, or hands, or feet: we need all those gifts if we are to function - and we need them all equally if we are to function fully.

But therein lies the rub in this Week of Prayer when we pray that all our churches may respond to Jesus' invitation that we all feel ourselves to be part of one family.

For a third conversation this last week with a member of St James' clarified this for me even more succinctly. For their conviction was that St James' could only be an effective Church community *if we accepted that people who liked doing things a different way, went off and did their own thing – somewhere else!* London is London: there are plenty of places to choose from: everyone is entitled to go and find their niche because there is bound to be somewhere which will fit that particular style, somewhere!

And of course there is some truth in that. This is a big city and it does have everything, if only we care to look! In dress, eating habits and entertainment, in sport, politics and education, our diversity is simply mind-boggling. To quote the Bishop of London: *when you are bored with London, you are bored with life!*

But is that 'parting of the ways' good enough for the friends of Jesus? Is there a higher calling than the invitation to find the most comfortable corner to inhabit?

Do we not need the reminder that Jesus chose twelve disciples with very different talents and insights; and that he told them never to go out on their own, but always two by two?

**Are we not persuaded by this long list of ministries in St Paul's letter, that whether we are apostles, prophets, healers, reconcilers, teachers or prayer companions, no one is less needed or of lesser status in the whole community than any of the others? Of course such diversity is going to be enormously challenging as we try to work out how all the varying tasks fit together and yes, it would be very nice if we had the jigsaw puzzle box available to know where to place each piece. But, by God's plan and design, fit they do, however frustrating it is to try to work out just how each of us relates to each other.**

**And that, ultimately, includes the new Christian for whom all we treasure about our worship is rather baffling; it includes the kind of kids whose anti-social behaviour marks them out as being in special need of the love of Christ; it includes the harassed social worker who feels condemned every time an event like this hits the headlines; it includes the illegal asylum seeker and the police-woman, the woman who felt compelled to end the life of her son, the banker whose discovered that her first month's maternity leave package was five times the average annual salary of the rest of the nation. *There are many members, but one body.***

**So finally: is all this a pipe dream – and a rather uncomfortable one at that? Possibly. But it seems to me that this line of thought is the logical conclusion of these 19 verses, the closest reading of Jesus' call for us to be one – and the only distinctive contribution we can make to a society which otherwise becomes more and more fractured and divided day by day.**

**For when St Pauls says *The body does not consist of one member but of many* he is not talking about numbers but about types. Pray with me that our churches will not rest content until they are true bodies, welcoming ALL to the Table of the Lord.**