

THE QUEST FOR UNITY

When he came to the territory of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples, 'who do you say that I am?'

Matthew 16.13

Caesarea Philippi lies in the foothills of Mt. Herman. It is one of the sources of the Jordan, lush and green in contrast to most of Israel, and here the Greeks had built a shrine to the god Pan. Pan was a fertility god, but later became identified with the physical universe. When Jesus went there it was at the turning point of his ministry. He had taught the people and healed the sick, travelling the country as he did so. From this northern-most point in his journey he turned towards Jerusalem and the shadow of the cross falls over the story. As he prepares for his final journey, in this place with the symbols of paganism around him, alone with his disciples – those who had heard his words and seen his deeds and who will now go with him to Jerusalem – he asks them who the people believe him to be. The people are confused: some say that he is John the Baptist, others Elijah, others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. Then he asks them the crucial question: 'who do you say that I am?' Peter replies, 'you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.'

It is not by chance that the Feast of the Confession of Peter (January 18th) marks the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, nor that the conversion of St. Paul (January 25th) marks its end, for the movement from the one to the other, from confession to conversion, is the dynamic of the Movement for Christian Unity. We seek unity not because it will be neater and tidier to have one Church, but because by acting together our

confession of faith will be more credible, and our action in commending that faith more effective in a world that has run after other gods and built its own shrines. One thing we have learnt in twenty years of the Ecumenical Movement is that the way of unity is not through big schemes but through local initiatives through which we discover our common confession of faith and encourage one another in local action in the world. Local unity begins when we can say together, 'you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Peter was able to answer as he did because he had been with the Lord, he had seen and he had heard. He answered from his heart. God had touched his life; he had seen the Lord. Jesus interpreted life in a way that convinced people that God cared for them, as his own precious children. In his own person he made plain the character of God as the shepherd who went in search of his sheep, just as Ezekiel had said he would:

I will go in search of my sheep and rescue them, no matter where they are scattered... I will search for the lost, recover the straggler, bandage the hurt, strengthen the sick, leave the healthy and strong to play and give them their proper food.' *(Ezekiel 34.12, 16)*

Peter confessed Jesus as Lord because Jesus had touched his life, and had given him a vision of God which was compelling, and in the power of the Resurrection he went out and proclaimed the triumphs of God who had called him out of darkness into his own marvellous light.

It was this same experience that converted Paul, and sent him out as an apostle to a pagan world. It is this experience of the living God that the Church is called to convey to the world, which,

like the ancients, has created its own gods by defying its ambitions and its desires.

These gods are powerful, and even religious faith has been debased into mere observance, an undemanding social ritual that is ultimately unsatisfying. There is today a common assumption that conventional attitudes are indeed Christian attitudes, and that being a Christian requires no great conversion of life. How strongly this contrasts with the experience of Peter and Paul; how far removed from a faith expressed as an offering of one's whole life, heart and mind, body and spirit. Today we live in the midst of a new paganism which is just as divisive as the paganism of Paul's day with its 'gods many and lords many' (*1 Corinthians 8.5*), and its divisions have patterned the world. Families break down, nations splinter into mini-states, racial and ethnic conflict increases and the gap between rich and poor grows scandalously. Most of the world's divisions are about seeking security, whether in doing our own thing, or in ethnic purity, or in economic power or military might, yet I sense that at a deeper level we know that what we really seek is reconciliation – both between people and among nations – but we lack a model of how it is to be achieved. The church ought to provide that model. At its heart is faith in a God who gave his life that his people might be reconciled; its message is of the Kingdom, the vision of creation healed; but its divisions mirror the world, and disable both its message and its action.

If this is right, and if it is true that ecumenism works best at the local level, then it seems to follow that local ecumenical action should be directed to bringing people together across their divisions. Local initiatives – where possible in partnership with secular agencies – to support and strengthen family life, offering mediation in disputes, reaching out to these of other faiths and to

the socially excluded, working for social justice, highlighting oppression and wrong, are a powerful witness to the world. Perhaps the most effective ecumenical action in Britain in recent years has been the ecumenical communities in Northern Ireland, several of which I visited when I spent a month there in 1992. Groups of Christians from the Catholic and Protestant churches have come together to live as a single household as a sign of reconciliation; their homes are often situated right on the so-called 'peace line' that marks the division between the loyalist and nationalist communities. For these Christians their common belief that Jesus is the Son of the living God, is more important than their separate beliefs about precisely how the salvation he offers is mediated.

This seems to me to be true to what Paul taught. It is evident from his letters that the local churches to which he wrote were divided in their opinions and behaviour, particularly the Church at Corinth. In response, he reminds them that the most important thing is their relationship with Jesus, followed closely by their relationship with one another. Faith and morality come before doctrine and tradition. Paul shows no concern for the kind of theological debate that characterises (and divides) the Church today, nor does he share its concern for power and status that so often compromises its moral authority. The same is true of the local ecumenical communities that I visited. Theirs is a powerful witness that, while the way we understand the faith is important, disagreement and difference do not lead inevitably to division and conflict. Unity does not mean uniformity.

In the end the politicians will have to negotiate the end of the troubles, but when they finally succeed it will be because the witness of these ecumenical communities has in large measure so changed the atmosphere that peace can dawn.

Christians who follow this example will find that in matters of social concern, in practical reconciliation, they have more common ground than they thought. They will also discover a new acceptance of their differences – indeed they will discover their irrelevance in the face of the world’s need. (I rather suspect that if organic unity comes about it will be because we shall have realised the irrelevance of our differences and not because the theologians have negotiated a solution.) They will also discover that reconciliation is personal not institutional. Reconciliation is the work of those who, like Peter, have seen the Lord and who yearn with him to go in search of his sheep wherever they are scattered and bring them home. It is demanding work, and it will involve suffering for the reconciler, but even so it is supremely worthwhile.

‘Some day when we have mastered the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we will harness for God the engines of love; and then for the second time in the history of the world we shall have discovered fire.’

(Teilhard de Chardin)