

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2009: Newtonbreda Presbyterian, Belfast

Theme: Glimpses of another way

Readings: Ezekiel 37 vv 15-24a
John 10 vv 14-16

Opening prayer:

Lord, open our eyes and hearts to hear your Gospel in fresh ways that can both inspire and disturb us to serve you in new ways in this New Year. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Opening story

It was early in the morning of the 12th July 1990. The sun was shining and the views over the west side of Belfast were stunning. I'd come down from the Corrymeela centre the previous day to join a study group and had spent the night at Clonard Monastery at the invitation of one of the monks – some of you will know Fr Gerry Cassidy.

I was looking out of a bathroom window on Clonard's top floor. In the foreground was that solid Peace Wall. Beyond that lay rows of old and new terraced housing on the Shankill Rd where I'd worked during the summer of 1970. Further out the green hills overlooked the city.

I was thinking of the many groups from either side of this wall that had spent time with us up at Corrymeela. The rich network of new relationships that had been built both across this and other separation walls (57 walls and gates) which still stretch over 13 miles in this divided Province. And the many invisible walls that divide neighbours from each other around the world today, even in my own country in New Zealand.

My moment of quiet reflection was disturbed by some gruff voices from below. A couple of men on the other side of the Wall were tending to the remains of an 11th night bonfire and had seen me looking down at them. I heard their abusive banter directed at me. It quickly escalated and I then remembered Fr Gerry telling me a story of a monk being killed by a sniper while standing at this same bathroom window in the 1920's. This banter had a long history.

The moment of peace and quiet was quickly gone, replaced by fear and my wanting to move quickly away from that window. In that moment, I watched a flock of pigeons swoop down from somewhere behind me, flap their way – as only pigeons can do - over this massive 20 foot concrete barrier into the Shankill, then sail back again to the Falls Road and Clonard. They flew this invisible circle some three times, riding on invisible air currents, and then disappeared from view.

But it was long enough for me to catch a vision from these ungainly grey pigeons, now transformed in my mind into 'white doves of peace'. A vision that reminded me of Paul's description in Galatians of God's unlimited love and grace that had broken down the barriers between us, and I quote, *'for in Christ Jesus we are all children of God through faith...there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female. For all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3 v.28)*

It was a vision of an inclusive community, a place free of fears and doubts, scapegoats and exclusions. It was a glimpse of a different future with a place for everyone. A shared future that recognised that each was made in God's image and each had a different gift to bring to God's great banquet. It was a magic moment.

Readings

Some two thousand six hundred years ago in 597 BCE, the prophet Ezekiel received a similar kind of vision from God. A Jewish priest, he was living in exile in Babylon – one of the many Judeans who had been removed from their home in Jerusalem by their invading neighbours. Ezekiel remained a man of influence and soon afterwards received a specific call from God to be a prophet, or God's appointed 'watchman', over a divided House of Israel.

In this chapter, parts of which we read this morning, his prophecies gave two bits of hope to the exiled Jews. The first is of the dry bones in the valley coming back to life – signs of God's promise of new life for those in exile feeling dead and without hope of ever returning to their homeland (37 vv 7-8). The second vision is this story of the two sticks of wood being held together in the prophet's hand.

These sticks represented the split caused some 300 years earlier when the nation was divided up into two separate kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

By holding these sticks together in his hand, Ezekiel was giving his jaded countrymen a symbol of hope and healing, a symbol of God's future vision and promise for them out of exile. God was promising to reunite the people from these divided Kingdoms and make them one again. By repenting of their past mistakes, the exiles would return to Jerusalem where they would once again become a nation under God. 'They will be my people and I will be their God'. (Ezek 37.23)

This vision of God wanting his people to reconcile their past differences, find new beginnings and become one again, was a powerful message to the people of Israel over 2'600 years ago. It was a magic moment for those who understood this glimpse into another future, just as it had been for me with those pigeons flapping in circles over that wall in West Belfast.

This glimpse of another way of living is repeated in our Gospel reading today. The symbol has shifted from two sticks of wood being held together in a prophet's hand, to one of a flock of sheep being herded together under the one shepherd. Now most of us are city dwellers with no understanding or interest in looking after sheep. But we can understand the idea of a relationship between the shepherd and the flock being akin to a personal relationship between God and God's people, whether they are Presbyterian, Methodist, Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecostal or any other label we like to define our identity as Christians.

Jesus is this shepherd (John 10.14-16): *'I know my sheep, they know me and I'm willing to die for them There are other sheep which belong to me that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them, too; they will listen to my voice and they will become one flock with one shepherd.'* It's an immensely powerful vision which never fails to move me.

I think of the many different flocks around the world. It is said that there are now over 9,000 different Christian denominations. The World Council of Churches itself is made up of 349 member churches. That's how broken and divided the Body of Christ has become today. The reality is that, as churches, we have failed to be and act as one flock

Irish ecumenism

It's no different on this island where there are hundreds of different churches, independent fellowships and chaplaincies. And many different clusters of churches and groups working ecumenically together at the local and regional levels all over the island.

Back in the 1920's, Irish church leaders felt there was a need to form a loose national council of churches on this island so they could meet, pray and act together as one flock. Since 1966, different ecumenical structures have evolved and funding found to appoint a general secretary and a small office to coordinate the work with churches in both the North and the South on this island. Rob, Jennifer and I now form that team.

I was appointed to this position in July 2004. I can easily identify with Ezekiel holding two sticks in his one hand, as I was asked to serve two national ecumenical bodies, the Irish Council of Churches and the Irish Inter Church Meeting.

The ICC is made up of 15 member churches, ranging from the well known mainstream Protestant ones (Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist); the smaller historic churches like the Lutheran, Moravian, Non-Subscribing Presbyterian church, Quakers and Salvation Army; and the growing house church movement is represented through LifeLink. Then add the 5 Orthodox churches which trace their roots to the time of the early Christian church (Antiochian, Coptic, Greek, Romanian and Russian); and a small Nigerian Pentecostal Church going by the name of the Rock of Ages Cherubim and Seraphim, a white garment church.

These 15 churches represent a very broad range of size, ecclesiology, doctrine and Christian identity. They have, for example, different dates for Christmas and Easter; they have different understandings of the Trinity and Baptism. Yet they are committed to being a flock of many colours and to meet together in the Lord's name as Protestant, Orthodox and Free churches. They meet four times a year.

So the ICC is one of Ezekiel's sticks I'm holding – the other one is called the Irish Inter Church Meeting which is made up of representatives of these ICC churches meeting on a 50/50 basis with representatives of the Irish Episcopal Conference. This involves the Cardinal, the Archbishop of Dublin, senior Bishops and ecumenical advisors. It is an informal meeting dating back to Ballymascanlon in 1973. They meet four times a year as well.

Attempts to bring these two sticks into one structure were thwarted in the General Assembly some ten years ago, as some of you may remember.

So my task is three fold:

- to hold these different sticks in one hand, remembering that they represent a total of some 3,250 local faith communities/congregations around this island
- to be the ecumenical instrument to help these churches to work more closely together
- to animate and encourage ecumenical work around the island.

And that has been a huge privilege for me as an English-born New Zealander to undertake, serving 16 churches across two very different political, economic and social policy contexts of Northern Ireland and the Republic.

When I joined you in your worship last Sunday, I couldn't help but notice your organ pipes at the front. I figured out that there were at least 16 that had a different size and shape – and that each would produce quite a different note. Yet each is needed to make the beautiful music we hear this morning. It's the same with these 16 churches. We need each other's different gifts and traditions so the Lord can be our organist and create something greater than ourselves.

The ecumenical task of Christian unity is the Lord's work. Unity is a gift, not something to strive for. Many look to the day when all of God's people can come around the Lord's Table and share in the mystery of receiving the Communion together.

So what have the churches done together over the past few years? I'd like to pick out three points.

- We've created spaces for the member churches to meet, pray and act together
- We've created resources to strengthen local inter-church networks
- We've taken initiatives

We've held conferences and meetings all over the island as far apart as Cork and Derry and listened to the experiences of local inter church groups.

Workshops have focussed on working together on issues ranging from climate change, racism and suicide; to the Bill of Rights, postmodernism, European issues, plus many more

We have met with politicians and overseas church leaders.

We've attended many church and ecumenical conferences

We've started round table discussions with the 8 Orthodox churches on this island.

We produce ***Irish Ecumenical News*** four times a year to share information and resources for local groups working together around the island and overseas

We've updated our website www.irishchurches.org with a diary of ecumenical events of what's happening around the country and resources for Advent, Lent, Care of the Environment, Racial Justice, and Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

We've registered as an employer in the Republic for the first time in 85 years and now employ a Project Officer in Dublin to help churches learn from each other in responding to welcoming local migrants into their communities. This is now into its 3rd year.

A few months ago we launched a new Directory, giving details of 361 migrant-led churches that have emerged around this island (esp. in South) over the past ten years. We now need to build relationships with these new contacts.

2009

Amongst our goals for 2009, we are planning a spring conference (ICC AGM) at the Moravian Gracehill settlement outside Ballymena to look at our lifestyles in the wake of the global credit crunch; and we are planning for an autumn conference in Dublin on Baptism (IICC)

We are advertising for a part-time Ecumenical Officer based in Dublin to help strengthen local ecumenism throughout the Republic (IICC).

We aim to publish a new booklet on '*What the Bible says about the Stranger.*' (AICCMR)

We hope to get funding to take forward an inter-church initiative on peacemaking and reconciliation that Rev Doug Baker and others have been preparing.

We hope to get the churches working together on their responses to the Eames/Bradley Commission '*Dealing with the Past*' when it gets launched at the end of this month.

The core of all this work is creating spaces for the Spirit to work, to encourage and inspire us to be the flock that Jesus calls us to be. A flock that is identified by its diversity, rather than its sameness; a flock that knows that we are stronger together and weaker apart; a flock that prays as God's people with open arms to 'Our Father', not to 'My Father.'

Final comments

We know the churches could do so much more together, both at the cutting edge and in speaking out more together. But the reality is that working denominationally is the default position and ecumenism is always an extra. As churches on this island, we know that we continually fail to be the flock that Jesus calls us to be.

But that doesn't stop us from being 'Kingdom builders' in whatever context we find ourselves. Kathleen Davey (co-Founder Corrymeela Community) and John Morrow (Leader, Corrymeela Community 1980-93) inspired and encouraged many of us in that journey. While these giant trees in the forest have sadly recently fallen, the sunlight can now burst through the forest canopy to nurture the younger saplings to grow and take their place.

So in this New Year, what glimpses do God's people in this parish community have of new ways of witnessing or acting together to become one stick or one flock? What invisible walls do we still need to break down together in our own streets and work places? How can we move in our local community life from what Duncan Morrow and David Stevens have described as our present '*Peace of Truce*' to a future '*Peace of Transformation?*' How can we be Gospel signs of this shared future in fresh ways?

Difficult questions for all of us to face in 2009, but I've no doubt the answers lie in these passages of Scripture that have inspired us this morning. We can trust prayer and the Spirit to guide us in whatever new risks we feel called to take. Foolish questions maybe, but then Ezekiel wasn't taken seriously in his day either!

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Michael Earle
General Secretary, Irish Council of Churches
January 18