

## Reflection for Sunday 16 May

In his autobiography, 'Steps along Hope Street,' David Sheppard, Bishop of Liverpool from 1975 to 1997, describes how then Prime Minister Harold Wilson, a Liverpool MP, advised that relationships between Protestants and Catholics in the city were too fragile to risk a royal presence at the consecration of Liverpool's new Catholic Cathedral in 1968. Liverpool and Glasgow had known the kind of bitter sectarian violence that still threatens to resurface in Belfast. The Queen, of course, did visit the Catholic Cathedral a few years later and Pope John Paul II visited the city's Anglican Cathedral in 1982.

The changes that made this possible came about in no small part because of the deep friendships that grew up between the leaders of the different Christian traditions on Merseyside, but ecumenism was in the air. The 1970's and 80s were a springtime of hope for Christian unity. A Merseyside Ecumenical Council was set up and felt sufficiently confident to appoint a part-time then full-time ecumenical officer to co-ordinate its work, a Baptist minister, my father.

The sense of excitement was tangible. The journey of discovery, the delight of new friendships, fresh possibilities was heady at times and no-one really knew where it might end. I remember sermons preached with passion on today's text from St John's Gospel, Jesus's so-called high-priestly prayer to God the Father, that his disciples 'may be one, as we are one.' A common theme was, if unity is God's gift, who are we to refuse to accept it wholeheartedly?

Almost two generations later, that sense of excitement and discovery on Merseyside and elsewhere has gradually given way to a far less time-consuming sense of ease with one another, a bit like a couple who've been married for many years, who've come to accept that they aren't going to change each other's little quirks and habits, but have learnt, with a sigh, to accept them. And yet Jesus's prayer still rings loudly in our ears. What must it mean for us now?

In the fifty years since Harold Wilson gave his glum advice, the biggest change the traditional churches of Britain and Europe have witnessed has been the far less digestible reality of a marked decline in both numbers and influence.

To a very considerable extent, the agenda of how to reverse this and how to change so as to make ourselves more appealing to those who seem to have given up on the church, has become altogether more pressing than that of visible church unity. Decline presents us whether we like it or not with a new and more unwelcome unity – we're all in it together.

Such an existential challenge also tends to put what may now seem like lesser disagreements into a rather different and less pressing perspective.

It's time to look again at Jesus's prayer. John has drawn together Jesus's words and teaching in an inspired way that also addresses the problems felt by the early church roughly two generations after events that John that describes. And as we know from so many other writings, and especially from St Paul, division and disunity was, by then, already a thorn in the flesh of the Christian community. That wasn't all. The world beyond the church was proving hugely resistant to the Christian mission and message, even to the point of outright persecution.

The disciples of John's day needed to be reminded that the situation they faced was nothing new. Jesus himself met with indifference and resistance. His message was rejected. John remembered and told it to them straight. And still tells it. Jesus's message, faithfully preserved by John, rings out today to remind us that Christian mission and church unity are always going to present us with major challenges. In other words, Jesus's message is for our day as much as it was to the church of the late first century.

One of the first lessons to learn from Jesus's prayer is that if we think that resolving our existing differences and divisions will make our mission easier and enable the church to grow again, we're very probably mistaken. This is not, of course, to let us off the ecumenical hook. We always need to seek the unity that is God's gift. Maybe one of the biggest lessons of the ecumenical movement is that we have come to value and treasure the differences embodied in our rich range of Christian traditions. We have learnt that no single human institution can ever be broad enough to embrace the richness of human responses to God's generous love.

The other lesson is that Jesus prays earnestly that we stick in and with the world, with all its hostility and contradictions. In fact, to be of God, is to try to see the bigger picture rather than becoming bogged down in the institutional concerns that are very clearly about the more narrowly human face of the church. To worry too much about the future of the church as we have known and loved it, maybe because it makes us feel comfortable and at ease and doesn't challenge us too much is, perhaps, a sign that we've given in to the world – to borrow the language that John remembers as authentically that of Jesus's own lips.

So what is the way forward? The clue, I think, is in the very last verse of our passage. It's in Jesus's pleas that we be sanctified in truth, which is theological shorthand for being drawn into God's own life as revealed by Jesus Christ. All we can do is to repeat the message Jesus himself repeated time and again to his friends. 'Love one another as I have loved you.' Do so with laughter, with imagination, with resource and courage. Do it together, whatever your differences. Dare I say, don't listen too carefully to the advice of the Prime Minister of the day. Leave the rest to God.