

Unity In Difference and Difference in Unity
Epiphany, Year A
Isaiah 60: 1-6
2 January 2011

Some of the Church Services and ceremonies that cluster around Christmas appear to be of great antiquity, but they are not. Take for instance the Service of nine lessons and carols that looks and feels like something from the 16th century. In fact the Dean of Truro Cathedral in north Cornwall invented it in the early 20th century. As for the Christingle Service, that was more or less cooked up by the Moravian Church that has only been around since the 18th century, and this particular Christmas custom only migrated to other churches in very recent times, though we are still not entirely sure what Christingles actually mean or stand for.

So will it surprise you to learn that back at the start the Christian Church didn't actually celebrate the incarnation of Jesus, i.e. Christmas, whereas it did celebrate the feast of the Epiphany? One of the reasons the western Church was more interested in today's big feast than that Johnny comes lately Christmas was that they seized on its significance as the invitation to the gentiles to believe. The recently converted barbarians of western Europe, and the reasonably new Latin Christians of the Roman Empire, saw that the three Kings represent the first instance of outsiders getting the message while the home team, the target audience, didn't.

If we put ourselves in Mary and Joseph's shoes in the Epiphany scene their likely reaction to these unexpected visitors, apart from thrilled gratitude, would be bewilderment at the utter strangeness and foreignness of people who were completely outside their experience. The tight knit and small world of rural Galilee would wonder what to make of these exotic and utterly different kinds of human beings. Here is a first instance of the good news bringing together people who wouldn't have dreamed that they had a common destiny in a new religious community.

Hold that thought as we move forward in time to the 20th century and ask ourselves what was the most important event in the history of Christianity over those 100 years. The answer that many would come up with is the Second Vatican Council. Meeting in Rome between 1962 and 1965 the bishops and theologians of the largest church on earth made far reaching decisions about the nature of the church. Usually councils of this importance concern themselves with big doctrinal questions about God and salvation, but this one was unusual in focusing pretty much on the theology of the church, a topic that is often thought to be too contentious. Indeed there is a struggle going on within Roman Catholicism as to what the Council

actually meant, and whether recent developments in their church have betrayed or upheld what was decided there.

This struggle for the soul of the church clusters around which description of the church matters most. The document progressives and conservatives fight over most is called *Lumen Gentium*, meaning the “light to the nations,” the image offered us in this morning’s Isaiah reading. *Lumen Gentium* is the most important product of the Second Vatican Council because it tries to say what it means for the church to be a light to the nations. It attempts to do this by picking up on the different images and metaphors that the Bible uses to describe the church. It is precisely at this point that some partisan picking and choosing goes on as to which images matter the most.

If you are of a progressive or liberal point of view the chances are that you will zero in on the metaphor of the church as the pilgrim people of God, engaged in a pilgrim journey like the children of Israel in their 40 year wandering across the Sinai en route to the Promised Land. It is a dynamic image that takes seriously the church’s progress through history, which admits that the church sometimes makes mistakes and needs to change and reform itself. If you are a traditionalist then you may well be drawn to such metaphors of the church as the body of Christ, or the bride of Christ. These images stress the mystical indwelling of the church by God who loves it deeply as the most prized part of creation. Sure Christians often let the church down, but there is a deep down Christ like character to it that human sinfulness can’t destroy or take away. The present and the last Pope are very keen on this way of thinking about the church.

In truth we need both these sets of images and metaphors, running in parallel with each other, kept in a state of creative tension with one another, just as they are in the Bible, which refuses to exclude or exalt one particular way of describing the church. In the same way we need both progressives and traditionalists in the church who have each got a vital contribution to make. That way there can be a difference in unity, and a unity in difference within this remarkable community of faith that parallels the startled unity of worship and adoration of Gentile Kings and Jewish artisans at the manger. I might add that it is also a paradigm reflection of the Divine Persons of the Trinity who each have their particular properties and missions within a deep unity of purpose and belonging.

The other nettle that *Lumen Gentium* tried to grasp is the tension between the local church and the universal church. To put it in our terms, how are Christians in Avonside to relate to Christians in the rest of New Zealand, and in Australia and the South Pacific, and then to take it to the next level, how are we to relate to Christians the world over in a effective way that shows we take seriously their claims on us and our mutual belonging to one another?

The traditional Roman Catholic answer was to see in the ministry of the Bishop of Rome an effective and authoritative centre of unity who would integrate the different parts of the worldwide church in to a true sense of belonging. *Lumen Gentium* and the Second Vatican Council tried to supply the other part of the equation – that valuing of the local church that would enable it to make its distinctive contribution to the world wide church, and that would enable it to get on with its local mission in an unfettered way. Some progress was made. The ordination of Bishops was now seen to be ordination in to the college of Bishops, and not to be just the Pope's man on the spot. Bishops were encouraged to meet and deliberate regularly at national and regional level. Extraordinary meetings of Bishops have taken place in Rome from time to time to make important decisions. But of course these are not genuine conciliar decision making councils because in the end the Bishop of Rome still has the last word and the decisive say as to what the outcome of these meetings will be.

This issue matters as much to Anglicans as it does to Catholics. Indeed, we are staring down the same telescope but from opposite ends. Anglicans genuinely value the local church, and through their Episcopal and synodical structures make it work reasonably well at a regional level. It is at the universal and worldwide level that we are in trouble. We just don't have an adequate theology of how the church behaves in an interdependent way across national and cultural boundaries in such a way as to show that it is genuinely God's unique and original enterprise in the world, and not just some weird multi national corporation. Gay Bishops were the presenting symptom in our current troubles, but it could just as easily have been lay presidency at the Eucharist as practised by our near neighbours the Archdiocese of Sydney. The real issue is how shall we sort out these contentious issues in such a way that the worldwide church and the local church are honoured in God's eyes and purposes.

The Roman Catholic Church has got a very fair point to make to us. In the end spiritual authority often requires the exercise of real authority, and somebody has to make those hard decisions. There are some situations where consensus isn't possible, and no amount of hand wringing and endless talkfests will sort things out.

At their best Anglicans genuinely believe in the power of church councils to make authoritative decisions for the church. That is our answer to Catholics – the Bishop of Rome should only exercise his ministry within and as a part of such Councils without controlling them. The trouble is we don't know how to make those kinds of decisive Councils work – or rather we don't trust each other, and maybe God enough to have a genuine go at having such a Council so as to get our house in order at a worldwide level. If we could do that

then we genuinely would be a light to the nations, a light to lighten the gentiles.