

Christ Church Cathedral. 29.7.'18. 2 Kings 4.42-44, Eph.3.14-21, John 6.1-21.

“I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

St Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians seems particularly apt this summer. As in the days of the early Church, so now, there are too many groups that, while claiming to be Christian, anathematise other Christians who understand the Gospel differently. It happens within churches and between churches - we see it within our own Church of Ireland and within the Anglican Communion. We saw it a few weeks ago between different Presbyterian churches in these islands and within those churches. Most recently we have seen it in New Zealand, where four parishes have applied for an “amicable separation” from the diocese of Christchurch, so as to avoid the possibility of their clergy blessing same-sex marriages.

And most newsworthy at the present time, we seem to be seeing it in the Roman Catholic Church in this country and beyond, in the matter of how Catholics and their friends define “The Family” in the run-up to next month’s World Meeting of Families. Doubt has been cast on the Meeting’s openness to those not from “church-approved organisations promoting Catholic social teaching”. The planned Church of Ireland stand has been cancelled and a liberal Catholic group has been seriously discouraged from participating and has withdrawn. The fear is that despite the Pope’s desire that all should be given a voice, there will be too little open-minded exploration of how to renew the Church and help the types of family most in need; instead, more re-affirmation of the *status quo*.

I hope that’s not true; I hope there will be lots of stimulating and frank exchange of ideas. But I’m afraid the contrary is a familiar story in many churches.

No doubt it is only “human nature” for people either to cling to power or to take up positions of rivalry. The way of least resistance is always to reject those who are different, aiming either to continue to rule the roost or to change the rules to our own liking.

But such narrow-mindedness in human nature needs to be redeemed. We have to admit that whatever knowledge we have as human beings is inevitably limited. Only the unconditional love of God, which is spiritual not rational, leads us towards the fullness of reality that encompasses opposites and reconciles our partial proud positions. “Judge not, that ye be not judged” is a commandment we too often ignore; but we ignore it at our peril – or worse, our ignoring it leads to general disrespect for all the churches, as those who might have been worshippers cry “a plague on all your houses”.

In Jesus’ day, too, many different Jewish sects and schools jostled for prominence and power. But Jesus welcomed all who came to him. Five thousand hungry people in a desert place? From minimal resources, one small boy’s lunch box, he provided food for every one of them, no questions asked. And as we know, Jesus always made a special point of welcoming the people no one else had time for – tax-collectors, lepers, unclean women, the mentally ill and the physically handicapped. If only we could all find in ourselves today that generosity of spirit – that unconditional welcome.

I’ve been thinking about the Church’s “Welcome” a good deal lately; especially since I came across a “Welcome” notice on a church door in England. I showed it to the dean here and he liked it so much that he’s put it on the back of today’s service leaflet. I know this cathedral offers a warm, no-questions-asked, welcome to every

one who comes to worship here. Even so, this English welcome notice takes things to a point that might challenge some of us. Try this for size:

“We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, gay, filthy rich, dirt poor. You’re welcome here if you’re ‘just browsing,’ just woke up, or just got out of prison. We don’t care if you’re more Christian than the Archbishop of Canterbury, or haven’t been to church since little Jack’s christening.

“We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet, and to teenagers who are growing up too fast. We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted. We welcome you if you’re having problems, if you’re down in the dumps, or if you don’t like ‘organised religion’ – we’ve been there too!

“We offer a welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don’t work, can’t spell, or because grandma is in town and wanted to go to church.

“We welcome those who are inked, pierced, or both. We specially welcome those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down their throat as kids, or got lost in the city and wound up here by mistake. We welcome tourists, seekers and doubters, bleeding hearts . . . and you!”

That’s not quite the full notice, but enough to give you the idea. What does it **not** include? Well, maybe hecklers and disturbers of the peace, the severely inebriated or those carrying syringes. Even so, it’s probably as close as one can get to extending Jesus’ welcome to all comers. I hope you relate to it.

But there is one thing it doesn’t do. It doesn’t invite people into conversation, suggesting that an exchange of views and experience is something provided for within this varied community of Christians and seekers after deeper truth. This is something I think we do have a chance to offer over coffee in the crypt every Sunday,

and perhaps if we made this clearer more of our visitors would stay. Please do stay today, unless you have a VERY pressing engagement.

The question remains: having welcomed one another, and listened respectfully to one another and shared our own thoughts in response, how do we move forward to a fuller appreciation, a deeper experience, of “the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge” leading to “the fullness of God” which always remains beyond our grasp? How can we come to appreciate “the breadth and length and height and depth” of God’s fullness, in which we live and move and have our being? How can we find unity in our diversity, agreement beyond our disagreements, and so bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit? Is it a bit lily-livered to admit that we might be wrong? It is always so much easier to suggest that some one else’s views are caused by personal trauma or false teaching. Never ours of course. Aren’t they founded on rock?!

Well if we feel like that we may be in good company! St Peter and St Paul fell out famously about the matter of admitting Gentiles to the Church, and St Paul’s insults were quite blistering. It took a dramatic vision of unclean animals coming down from heaven and a noticeable anointing of the Holy Spirit to persuade Peter to accept Gentile believers; and St Paul had to move from debating to listening skills to win through to harmony and compromise at the Council of Jerusalem, which decisively accepted Gentile believers to the Church. For us too, openness to the leading of the Spirit and learning to listen both to God and to one another is the only way forward. It’s generally known as “discernment”, a gift has been greatly prized since New Testament times.

Within the last 150 years or so, the Anglican churches have moved from trusting such discernment to church leaders to including elected lay people in the process through diocesan or provincial synods. And there are some hopes that Pope

Francis will succeed in moving the Catholic Church in the same direction. But synodal decision-making is no silver bullet. Even where two-thirds majorities are required on major issues, the debating system we have inherited from the parliaments of Queen Victoria's day points up differences rather than promoting reconciliation.

We've seen that even in the Lambeth Conference. Voting after heated debates doesn't really allow us truthfully to say: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," as James and the apostles did at the Council of Jerusalem. So we need to find a better, more prayerful, more mutually respectful way. There was some hope that we were doing that when for Lambeth 2008 Rowan Williams introduced the "indaba" style of discussion from African culture - a discussion where everyone has a voice, attempting to find a common mind or a common story that each participant can pass on to others when the talking is done. It succeeded in making that Lambeth Conference less adversarial than the last, but it hasn't stopped the threat of schism in the Anglican Communion on sexuality issues.

The ship of the church, whether local or universal, is once again in stormy seas, and Jesus the Lord, the one who sees himself as a servant and resists the populist desire to make him king, seems to be missing. It's time we took him into the boat.

We need to see Jesus in the stranger, to invite those who are different or even terrifying to come share and pray with us, risking the possibility that they will change us. My hope is that we will do that. It could bring us to our destination sooner than we think, as "immediately the boat reaches the land". And there will be true bread from heaven!

Canon Ginnie Kennerley, 29.7.2018