

SERMON IN WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL
BY THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY, DR. DONALD COGGAN
25th January, 1978

We meet, as our service paper reminds us, on the seventieth anniversary of the first Week of Prayer for Unity. We thank God for those Roman Catholics and Anglicans who first conceived the idea, and for men like the Abbe Paul Couturier who gave it new direction and broadened its basis.

We meet, also, on the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul - a day particularly meaningful to me, partly because of the influence which the apostle has exercised over me for more than half a century, and partly because it was on the Feast of his conversion that I was consecrated a Bishop in the Church of God twenty-two years ago.

It is understandable if something of the "first, fine, careless rapture" of earlier weeks of prayer has been lost as the years have gone by. Until comparatively recent times, it was unusual to find Christians of different traditions worshipping and praying together. Now, thank God, this is a common experience. The novelty of the idea has passed away. It would be sad if the passionate desire for unity which gave birth to the idea of a week of prayer grew less. We must not rest content with what has already been achieved or with any concept of unity short of God's full will.

Two great longings burn in my heart as I address you tonight. Let me share them with you. The first is admirably summed up in the Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi, which was quoted in the Common Declaration signed by His Holiness the Pope and myself when I visited Rome in April last year. The Exhortation and the Declaration spoke of a "greater common witness to Christ before the world in the work of evangelization". In a letter addressed to me by the Pope in October last year, he referred to this again,

and in a message of Christmas greetings to the Pope I took the matter up again, in the light of the meteoric rise in world population and of the spread of materialistic philosophies of life in many parts of the world.

Such joint evangelistic work, such spreading of the light of Christ in the menacing darkness of our world, is not, and cannot be, brought about by resolutions agreed to by Church leaders. A decade ago, Cardinal Bea, writing to my predecessor, Archbishop Michael Ramsey, approved the recommendation of the Malta Report that there should be "periodical joint meetings in regions where both the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion have a hierarchy of either the whole or some considerable representation of the two hierarchies" and "consultations on pastoral problems of evangelization in the modern world". That, I repeat, was ten years ago. I doubt not that a beginning has been made in the implementation of these recommendations. But the process is too slow, in view of the speed with which forces inimical to Christianity press on with their programmes. Nor must these consultations be confined to the members of the hierarchies. The whole people of God, in their own communities and areas, must together take counsel, and act, in being torch-bearers of the Light.

This, it seems to me, is a matter of mere obedience to the Lord of the Church. The command to "go into all the world and make disciples" has never been withdrawn; and obedience to this command is only weakened - I had almost said vitiated - if we go separately and dividedly.

Already, in various joint activities in mission, we have proved that, when we are obedient to our Lord's command, and when we reach out to the untouched masses together, God

in His goodness gives us a measure of unity which hitherto we have not experienced. Unity is a bonus given by the Lord to those who obey Him.

Slowly but surely Christians in this country are coming to realise that the spreading of the good news of God's love in Christ and of His power to save and redeem men is not the task of a small coterie within the Church. It is incumbent on every baptised member of the Church. It is part of his discipleship, and it is his highest privilege. Evangelism comes second only to worship in the priorities of a man who would be faithful to his Lord. As this conviction deepens, we shall see, ever more clearly, the necessity of united action.

Already we have achieved a remarkable unity in the proclamation of the word of God. Only a few years ago, the societies whose first task it is to see that the Bible, in whole or in part, is available to as many people as possible in a language they understand and at a price they can afford, worked without the aid of their Roman Catholic brothers and sisters. Now they work together - all over the world - the hands of men of all the Churches mightily strengthened by their joint participation in spreading the word of life. This is a great and constructive achievement in an area of work which demands great skill and devotion, an advance for which we may all thank God and from which we may all take courage.

This leads me to the second longing which burns in my heart and which I would share with you tonight. Let me preface what I have to say about this by remarking that for many years it has been my great privilege to enjoy the friendship of my dear brother in Christ, Basil Hume. I have shared with him, as my friend and host, what I am saying to you in this address,

and he has expressed himself happy that I should say it, even though he is unable to agree with me because of theological differences. Next week he will, I hope, speak to us with equal frankness when he is our guest at our General Synod.

I think it is a measure of the maturity which dialogue between us has reached, and, I would hope, a measure of the maturity of the dialogue between our two communions, that we can speak openly on matters on which as yet we are not fully agreed, one of which is the matter of our joint participation in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Such frank dialogue, undertaken in deep love, is, I believe, the most fruitful way forward to the goal we both long for.

We are united in our common baptism into the Triune Name. We are united in our love for the Lord who loved us and gave Himself up for us. We are united in our membership of His Church, though there are still areas of theological interpretation in which we do not find agreement and which no doubt will continue to perplex us. We are united in our desire to be obedient to the Lord's commission to "go... make disciples... baptise... teach". We are united, as I have just said, in the ministry of spreading the printed word. This is a wonderful measure of unity. This is the result of the operation of the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God. But, let us confess it, the impact that we make on a world which, like the Greeks in St. John's Gospel, "would see Jesus", is pathetically feeble, the witness we bear is muted, the vision which we share is blurred. I ask: Why is this so? Can the reason be that we are divided at the deepest point of unity, the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ? Is this God's judgement on us for failing to grasp this nettle? We recognise our unity in baptism; we persist in disunity at the Eucharist. So we go to our mission weak, where we should be strong and invigorated by joint participation in the Supper of the Lord.

We shelter behind differences of doctrine, of expression, of explanation. But is there, underlying it all, almost in our sub-conscious, a failure to repent of the way we have injured one another in the past? My attention has recently been drawn to a passage in Dean Church's essay on Lancelot Andrewes, where he says of the conflict in the reigns of Elizabeth and James I: "Controversy, never silent, and always truculent and unsparing, was but a light matter compared with the terrible hostilities carried on, not by word, but by deed.... We may well be aghast at the horrors of the struggle. The deep hatreds and deep injuries of the political conflict gave to the theological controversy - the necessary theological controversy - an unfairness and virulence from which it has never recovered, and which have been a disgrace to Christendom, and fatal, not merely to unity, but in many ways to truth".

We are the heirs of those who shared in these terrible deeds. Our eyes, to a lesser or greater degree, have been blinded to the saving, healing truths of the Gospel. We rejoice at the three agreed statements produced by the members of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission. We rejoice at the recent dedication of the memorial in Westminster Abbey to the martyrs who "divided at the Reformation by different convictions laid down their lives for Christ and conscience sake". But should I not be asking - as indeed I now do - for the forgiveness of my Roman Catholic friends for the lingering attitudes of suspicion and coldness - even sometimes of contempt - which characterised us up to fifteen or twenty years ago, and sometimes do so still? And should not that confession of sin be sealed in joint participation in the sacrament of Holy Communion? Is not that the way forward to that unity without absorption of which Pope Paul, echoing a phrase first used in

1925, spoke when we met in Rome last year?

Throughout the world, men and women, ordained and lay, in both our communions, are refusing to continue in disunity at what Christ intended to be the sacrament of unity, Roman Catholics receiving at Anglican hands the tokens of Christ's passion, and vice-versa. I have seen this happen, and taken part in it, and been deeply moved by it, in Australasia and in other places beyond these islands. Order within the Church matters, and encouragement must not be given to the breaking of rules. But I ask: Is the Holy Spirit speaking to the leadership of our Churches through the voice of people who see, with a clarity sometimes hidden from our eyes, the scandal of disunity?

In the two famous passages in St. Matthew's Gospel (16,19 and 18,18) about 'binding' and 'loosing', it is generally recognised that in Aramaic the terms to 'bind' and to 'loose' are academic language for the decision of the rabbis as to what was 'forbidden' or 'permitted'. Among us in the past, more attention has been given to 'binding' than to 'loosing', to 'forbidding' than to 'permitting'. I ask again: Is the Spirit saying to the Church: "Ye that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbours, draw near with faith - draw near together with faith - and take this Holy Sacrament to your comfort"?

As I pondered on this matter last week, I listened again to those words of St. Paul in which he spoke of the age-long barrier which separated Jews from Gentiles, Gentiles from Jews. He had been brought up under the old rules and regulations. Now they were annulled. The wall was down. The enmity was broken. Christ had done - was doing - His reconciling work. This is what he wrote: -

"For he is himself our peace. Gentiles and Jews, he has made the two one, and in his own body of flesh and blood has broken down the enmity which stood like a dividing wall between them; for he annulled the law with its rules and regulations, so as to create out of the two a single new humanity in himself, thereby making peace. This was his purpose, to reconcile the two in a single body to God through the cross, on which he killed the enmity." (Ephesians 2,14-16, NEB)

Let that be our text tonight, and let that be our guide tomorrow.

There is a Lord to be obeyed.

There is a light to be passed on.

There is a world to be won.

We have talked about the pain of disunity long enough. Now let us act.

And in the strength of the Body broken and the Blood outpoured, we will walk in love, and we will go in peace.