

*Preached by the Revd Dr Michael Piret, Dean of Divinity, on Sunday 23 January (in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity) 2011, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.*

The reading we heard a couple of minutes ago, from First Corinthians, should be instructive for anyone harbouring fantasies about what's sometimes called the 'primitive, undivided church.' Paul has heard on the grapevine about squabbling among the Christians at Corinth – some of them saying, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I'm for Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas.' It's a bit like the ridiculous scene in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, where Brian's followers split themselves into two: some of them worship one of his sandals, others are devoted to a gourd he has left behind. It's not about Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas – or sandals or gourds for that matter – it's about Jesus Christ, who is not divided.

Disunity didn't start with the breach between Eastern and Western Christians in 1054. It didn't start with the Protestant Reformation. It hasn't started with present-day arguments about same-sex partnerships or women bishops. It was a problem when Paul wrote First Corinthians around the year fifty-four. And at their best, Christians have always felt shame and unease about these divisions, especially when considering the prayer of Christ for his followers at the Last Supper, when he prayed that they all might be one, as he and God the Father are one. Those words are a challenge to us, and there have been some earnest and positive attempts to meet the challenge. One of them is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which we're in the midst of, right now. It doesn't matter that some trace the origins of this observance to eighteenth-century Pentecostals, while others trace it to nineteenth-century Evangelicals, and others, to more recent Anglo-Catholics, or indeed to Roman Catholics. Whatever denomination deserves the most credit for its existence, doesn't matter. A set period each year to pray for the Unity of Christians is a superb idea, and it would still be a superb idea, even if it did nothing but remind us (on a yearly basis) of the scandal of disunity.

But it can be, and of course it is, much more than just a yearly opportunity to feel glum about our divisions. It's an occasion to reflect on ways we can move forward. In the face of controversy and quarreling, all sorts of remedies get suggested. Some say we should explore the common legacy of the ancient creeds of the church, or have ecumenical dialogue on old points of disagreement that no one cares about any more. Some recommend worshipping in different ways, feeling it helps to get inside the skin of other Christians, to see what works for them and reflect on how their experience relates to ours. Some say we just ought to concentrate on the Church's shared mission to the poor and needy. And I have to say that in my experience at Magdalen over the years, shared practical action to support the work of Christian Aid, side by side, undertaken together by students who come to Chapel and those who attend more Evangelical city churches – such practical action has probably done more to build real unity among Christian students, than anything else.

So, common study of the legacy we share, ecumenical conversation, shared worship, putting our shoulders to the wheel together to serve and honour Christ in the poor – these are all ways of advancing Christian Unity. But, as we celebrate the four-hundredth anniversary of the King James Bible this year, it's a good time to consider that there's another way as well. We can also strengthen Christian Unity by going back to the Bible (not necessarily the King James Version!) – but back to the Bible.

You may be thinking, quietly, ‘What a terrible idea.’ You may be thinking that nothing in the world is more likely to breed rancour and bitterness between Christians than a Bible study. And I have been to Bible studies which would reinforce your worst suspicions. But I’m thinking not so much of Bible studies as such, as I am of the Bible itself, and of what we might learn if we look honestly at the way we ourselves encounter and interact with it. If we thought more often about that, we might start to understand more about those who disagree with us – and we might, with God’s help, grow in perspective, humility, and in unity.

Because the very thing that makes Bible study seem an unpromising path to unity, is also something that could potentially bring us together. We all know why it seems a hopeless means of promoting unity. Think of the ways in which Bible verses get thrown around as weapons, used as brickbats, argument-clinchers that are supposed to shut discussion down, because presumably they give us the last word on some difficult matter. It isn’t unusual for Christians to produce different verses, different Biblical arguments, to try and shut down discussion of the same question in opposite ways. The matter is not settled when somebody asks, ‘Do you believe it’s the inspired word of God or not?’ Believing that the Bible is inspired, God-breathed, does not mean believing that everyone’s interpretation of it is inspired or even correct. Both sides in a dispute may easily be convinced that they hold the Biblical cards, remaining divided, eyeing each other suspiciously – since the other side *claims* to be Christian ... but (clearly) doesn’t believe in the Bible.

All of us, when we interpret Scripture, bring with us the heavy load of who we are, how we have been shaped and formed: by whom, where, indeed in what type of church, with which Christian friends and mentors. The weight of who we are has an immeasurable influence on how we read and interpret Scripture. And if we’re in the habit of not reading Scripture enough (which probably goes for most of us), it becomes dangerously easy for us to equate the Bible and what it teaches, merely with those familiar parts of the Bible which affirm the views we already hold.

So in the interest of promoting Christian Unity, can we begin, first of all, by acknowledging that none of us comes to the Bible as a perfectly neutral reader? Can we at least concede that we all come to Scripture with the baggage of our own particular upbringing and background, our own social and cultural biases, even what Walter Brueggemann calls our ‘vested interests’ – our passions and convictions, our prejudices, anxieties, maybe our fears?<sup>1</sup> Who knows, if we could at least acknowledge that, we might be less likely to regard our own interpretations (and those of the people we agree with) as the Gold Standard. We might be less likely to think our understanding always has to be the correct one, from which any conflicting view must be a deviation or mistake. It is to be hoped that in a university, we are already in the habit of applying a similar principle to our intellectual selves, already in the habit of questioning our own views and allowing them to be questioned. I’ll bet if we put that principle to work much more on our Bible-reading selves, we’d be slower to close the shutters, or put up the barricades, against fellow-Christians whose views seem to us at best to be a challenge, at worst to be foolish or offensive. It might even free us from the arrogance which so readily assumes that our adversaries in argument cannot possibly have anything to teach us.

Such openness to the alien views of others would be a worthwhile exercise in humility. It could also be of use, I think, in cultivating humility towards the otherness of

Scripture – towards the alien strangeness we are always certain to find in the Bible itself, whenever we really spend enough time reading it.

There is a way in which we here in Chapel are very deficient in this area, because on Sunday mornings and at Evensong as well, we use lectionaries which carefully set out only certain portions of Scripture to be read, in a series of limited cycles. A process of editing, by the international liturgical authorities as well as by your own Dean of Divinity, consistently presents a series of highlights for devotional consumption, a sort of Biblical version of the Hall of Fame on Classic FM. By contrast, in olden times, the Prayer Book appointed that at Morning and Evening Prayer, most of the Old Testament was read through, every year, and most of the New Testament twice a year – chapter after chapter – in order, without regard to theme, matters of taste, preference, politeness, or anything else. If we were to read through all those books systematically in that way ourselves, one of the first things we'd notice would be the frequency with which we are challenged, confronted with presentations of God which sit most uneasily alongside the ones we take for granted. We'd come across plenty of things we don't particularly like: ideas of God that challenge us in unwelcome ways – not only the pity and mercy, the soothing and comfort we like to concentrate on, but an angularity, an abrasiveness, a God who makes us shake in our boots, a God whose longing for truth and justice alarms us and demands that we change our lives. We would find many things that lead us beyond the boundaries of the views we already hold, and make us question why we so often presume to contract the meaning of Scripture and the will of God to the dimensions that suit us. We have tried to tame the Bible and cut it down to our own proportions. But it is in reality an arresting, wild, infinitely rich, varied, unpredictable book; and thank goodness it defies all our attempts to reduce it to a mere reflection, or echo, of our own little selves.

To read more of the Bible than we do, thoughtfully and systematically, is a way of being saved from seeing in Scripture nothing but the reflection of our own face – or hearing nothing more than the echo of our own voice.<sup>2</sup> It can be a way of opening ourselves up to the otherness of God, and to the otherness of the ways in which fellow-believers experience God. This is not a radical idea. It's simple faith that if we give the Holy Spirit some room to get to work on us, we make ourselves more available for development, correction, learning, and – we may reasonably hope – sympathy and charity towards our neighbours. We might even come to see, in our neighbours, more of a kindred searching spirit than we thought they possessed, as we draw closer to the wonder of God, in their company, on our knees.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, 'Biblical Authority: A Personal Reflection,' in *Struggling with Scripture* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), pp. 5-31, see p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Brueggeman, p. 24.