

Sermon for Mount Macedon and Riddells Creek

2nd of August, 2009

Ephesians 4:1-16

Today is going to be one of those days when I regress. It happens occasionally; there are times when the historian in me breaks out. So to those of you who were expecting this to be a sermon, I need to apologise. What you're getting more of a history lecture.

It's a history lecture prompted by today's epistle. Last time I was here I talked about the nature of the letter to the Ephesians, and the agreement by scholars that this isn't a letter, but an essay on the nature of the church. In this letter, as I said last time, the church is a universal phenomenon, which will ultimately include all of creation, and the body of Christ; with Christ as its only head. Today's extract continues that theme, reminding us that as parts of that body we are all called to work together for good: "we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."

Today's reading makes some of the Scriptures' most powerful statements about the oneness of the church. "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." Today's reading is one of the foundational texts of the ecumenical movement.

The work ecumenical comes from the Greek word, *oikoumene*, meaning "the inhabited earth" or "the whole world". The ecumenical movement, the movement to unite the Christian churches, recognises the spiritual unity of the people of God throughout the whole world, and works towards enabling Christians to visibly live out that unity. The ecumenical movement recognises that just as there is one Spirit, so God calls us to be one body, the one Church.

The one Church has been splitting into multiple parts almost from the beginning. The church may be the body of Christ, but it is also a human institution, and humans are prone to disagree. Agreeing to disagree has not, until recently, been part of the church's history. Disagreements lead to divisions, with each side of a conflict believing that they alone were right. The Eastern and Western churches split in 1054 in the Great Schism; then the Western church split into Catholic and Protestant in the sixteenth century. Today there are apparently 34,000 separate Christian groups. But because the need for the church to be one as the Father and Son and Holy Spirit are one is so obvious, there have always been attempts to reunite the split church.

The modern ecumenical movement is usually said to have begun in 1910 at the World Mission Conference in Edinburgh. The Conference recognised the urgent need for unity if the church was going to be successful in mission. How could the existing churches convince non-Christians of the reality of God's love, if Christians did not love each other? The conference created the International Missionary Council, the first permanent, international, ecumenical body.

One of the participants at the Edinburgh conference was Bishop Charles Brent. He was so inspired that he convinced his church, the Protestant Episcopal Church in the USA, to invite all churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, to meet together to discuss issues of Faith and Order. Their first gathering was at Lausanne in 1927. Representatives of Orthodox churches came, as well as Protestants and Anglicans. The Catholics didn't come, but Pope Benedict the 15th sent his good wishes.

Around the same time that theological issues were being discussed at the Faith and Order conference, the Swedish Archbishop, Nathan Soderblom, responded to the challenge of the First World War with a gathering on Life and Work. The first was held in Stockholm in 1925, with the motto: "Doctrine divides, but service unites". The idea was that different churches might not be able to agree on theological issues, but they could work together to serve the world.

So, there was the International Missionary Council; the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work; and the World Council for Faith and Order. Each held conferences, and at each of these conferences members of different denominations met each other, worshipped together, and discovered the

incredible excitement and privilege of gathering together with other Christians – the joy of being part of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church. In 1937 it was decided to merge Life and Work and Faith and Order, and form a World Council of Churches. Sadly, before the World Council could be convened, World War Two broke out.

During the war, the World Council of Churches in the Process of Formation had an office in Geneva helping refugees from Nazi Germany and passing information between churches in occupied territories and the outside world. The WCC was finally formally established by the official representatives of 57 churches from the Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox traditions at the First General Assembly in Amsterdam on the 23rd of August, 1948. The three denominations that would later form the Uniting Church were among the 57.

Today, the WCC has more than 340 member churches in over 100 countries, representing about 550 million Christians. Member churches agree that: “The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” The Catholic Church isn’t a member of the World Council, but since Vatican Two there has been a joint working group co-sponsored by the WCC and the Catholic Church, and the Catholic Church is a full member of the Faith & Order Commission.

Half the Christians in the world are Catholic. One-quarter of the world’s Christians, including all of us, are part of the WCC. That leaves another quarter of the world’s Christians who weren’t part of the ecumenical movement in any way. So in 1998 the Global Christian Forum began as a series of conversations among Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant, Revival, Evangelical, Pentecostal and African Independent churches. And that ends my very quick history of the modern ecumenical movement.

To return to the letter to the Ephesians, which prompted this history lecture; the unity of the church is not a static unity. It is not about Christians finding others who agree with us and settling down together. It is an open unity that will ultimately include the entire universe. Christ’s body is a growing body. Ultimately all things will be gathered up and embraced in Christ. The role of Christians is live in such a way that unity is possible – living with humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. This is an incredibly difficult thing. It means recognising that some of our most cherished beliefs may be wrong. It means being open to learning from other Christians after centuries of mistrust. And this is not only true for Christians of different denominations, it is also true for Christians within one denomination and congregation. Divisions and disagreements can be just as intense within congregations as between Western and Eastern churches, or between Protestants and Catholics. And the solution is the same: humility, patience, gentleness and love.

I want to end with a prayer written by a Welshman called Noel Davies. Let us pray:

We celebrate today, Lord, the unity we already have,
not an empty hope, not a fool’s dream,
but the sure fact of our faith: there is one body.
For the unity of your body, the church
in all its variety of tradition and practice,
of language and culture,
of history and circumstance,
we thank you, Lord.

Amen.