

Bishop Mark's Christian Unity Week Homily.

I thank you for this invitation to be with you this evening. I thank God for this gathering of Christians from different traditions during this Christian Unity week. As we gather together, we are forcibly reminded that what we share, in Christ, is greater than what continues to divide us.

I want in this place, on this evening, in the context of our prayer together, to give voice, not to the difficulties that exist between Christians, but rather to give thanks for the co-operation and the journeying together that has grown in these past decades.

It is good for us to be together, to pray with and for one another. We are all well aware of the challenges, the blessings, the disappointments and the signs of hope which have marked the ecumenical journey. I'm sure you have all heard the story of the Catholic priest in the west of Ireland, at the turn of the 20th century. He was trying to raise money for a new Church hall and had a collection in the town. He announced the results the following Sunday to his congregation "Mrs Murphy – 2 shillings, Mr O'Connor – 3 shillings, Mr Taylor - £20....Mr Taylor is a Protestant....would to God that you were all Protestants!"

Well, things have moved on from those days. This evening we entrust our journey together to the Lord, confident in His providence and the power of His grace. We believe that when the Lord acts he does mighty things, he is faithful to his covenant. He is the One who draws close to each of us, and invites us to look to Him for all we need:

"Incline your ear, and come to me;
Listen, so that you may live", the prophet Isaiah encourages us.

Some of my own theological formation as a young priest took place in Oxford in the early 1990's where I was fortunate to have the accompaniment and friendship of Rowan Williams, then Lady Margaret Professor. He showed such great sensitivity and encouragement to me in my faltering attempts to explore the theology of the Swiss Catholic theologian, Hans Urs Von Balthasar. That in itself was an ecumenical enterprise – a young Catholic priest tutored by an Anglican Theology professor on a German speaking Catholic who in the latter part of his life had been made a Cardinal! I have to admit, when Rowan's young daughter, Rhiannon - then aged 4 or 5 - would come in to his study demanding that her daddy read something from the stories of Postman Pat, who was all the

rage with toddlers at that time, it was something of a relief. But the time that we spent together instilled in me what I came to recognise as a kind of 'affective ecumenism'. We have often heard in these years that 'affective ecumenism will lead to effective ecumenism'.

Jesus death and resurrection created a new world and a new people. It is a people to whom Jesus has given the life of Heaven, a genuine fraternity; in mutual welcome, in sharing with one another and in self-giving. St Peter's letter helped the first Christians realise that God's love had made them "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation God's own people." (I Peter 2:9).

It is the reality of Christ's person, his saving work and above all the fact of his resurrection, which is the content of the apostolic kerygma and those earliest formulas which, beginning in the New Testament itself, have guaranteed the integrity of its transmission. The Church's unity, in a word, can never be other than a unity in the apostolic faith, in the faith entrusted to each new member of the Body of Christ during the rite of Baptism. It is this faith which unites us to the Lord, makes us sharers in his Holy Spirit, and thus, even now, sharers in the life of the Blessed Trinity. And of course it is this communion of life and love in the Trinity which is the basis of communion among the Lord's followers.

Our common task must be to help those who do not know Him, to encounter the Lord Jesus, and to come into this life of the Blessed Trinity. In this way we show that we are salt and light. Salt must not lose its flavour and light must not be kept under a bushel.

For many in our society God has "become the great Unknown." There was that very interesting statistic recently from a YOUgov poll which suggest that the majority of people in Britain, under the age of 40, now describe themselves as having "no religion".

I know there's an issue with statistics. My first degree was in Geography and Maths and one of my Professors used to say there are "Statistics, more statistics, and lies...."

And of course you cannot judge the action of the Holy Spirit by the numbers of people in our churches. Nowhere in the New Testament does the Lord promise full churches. Yet, we profess belief in an incarnate Lord, and a visible body of believers. Acts and the letters of the New Testament, especially, are full of accounts of a community that is growing, expanding

and being called to share its Lord with those who do not know Him. Neither can we be neutral about this reality. We believe strongly, passionately, in the reality of a Lord who desires that all are made for eternal life with Him. We cannot be indifferent to the fact that many of our brothers and sisters do not seem to have a sense of encounter with Him.

A new Evangelization will not be achieved through more meetings, in simply adopting new methods of announcing the Gospel or by an activism which is soulless. Our witness is manifest, in the first place, through personal conversion, in drawing close to the One who above all others gives us life and guides us in how we are to walk together.

The heart of our Christian life is to bring people into a relationship with Jesus Christ. Our proclamation is focused on Jesus, his Gospel and his way. Our lives are defined by our encounters with Jesus.

Pope Francis has stressed this again and again. In *Evanglii Gaudium*, his wonderful letter on the Joy of the Gospel, he stresses:

“The first proclamation must ring out over and over: “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.” (Par 164)

We must realise ever more deeply that this proclamation is called “first” not because it exists at the beginning and can then be forgotten or replaced by other more important things. It is first in a qualitative sense, too, because it is the principal proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways, the one which we must announce one way or another all the time.

We must first meet the Lord, and daily encounter Him, if we are to be able to live what He teaches. This is what Pope Francis means by our proclamation taking place “in a missionary key”. We are called to be “missionary disciples”. “Disciples”, because we daily seek to become closer to Our Lord. And “Missionary” because we must share Him with those around us who do not know the beauty of an encounter with Him.

Only an experience of God’s love can prepare the mind and heart for everything else that Christian faith offers and teaches. This must be the heart, too, of our dialogue with one another. Helping each other to be more faithful, more dedicated, followers of the Lord. We know that the friendships we forge, and which we continue to make, the dialogue which

we have begun and the hope which guides us will provide strength and direction as we persevere on this journey together.

“You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world....let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”.

Lord, help each one of us to be salt, to be light, to be truly your missionary disciples...that the world may believe. Amen

+Mark O'Toole,
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