

The Ecumenical Scene – An Overview.

I want to offer you not one but three texts

Jeremiah 32: 9 And I bought the field at Anathoth from my cousin Hanamel, and weighed out the money to him, seventeen shekels of silver. I signed the deed, sealed it, got witnesses and weighed the money on the scales.

32:15: For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

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...

This verse from Ephesians is a classical expression of the ecumenical movement. And I find it hard to ignore when asked to contribute any thinking to which way the ecumenical weather vane is pointing. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in January will be marked by material prepared by the Churches of Scotland and will acknowledge the Edinburgh 1910 World Mission Conference as a significant moment in the ecumenical journey. That conference was called because it was recognised that the missionary endeavour was hampered by divisions among the churches. Missionaries working in India, the Pacific and the Americas saw that competition between groups was weakening the effort to share the gospel. The questions they faced were how can you talk about reconciliation in Christ if Christian disciples are themselves divided. During the past century reconciliation between Christians has taken on very different forms. Spiritual ecumenism has shown how important prayer is for Christian unity. Great energy has been put into theological research which has led to a large number of doctrinal accords. Practical cooperation between churches in the social field has given birth to fruitful initiatives. Alongside these major accomplishments, the question of mission has had a particular place. Personally I still believe that the need for Christians to heal the wounds of division is imperative to the task of the church to bring about the Kingdom of God in both space and time.

The problem with the present ecumenical dialogue is that it is too narrow, too confined to church well being and church traditions. The word ecumenical derives from the Greek word οἰκουμένη a term used to describe the whole inhabited earth or at least the part that they knew about. At the heart of ecumenism should be a care for the whole created order. The relationship between churches is a very small part of the goal to establish right relationships between women and men, between the human species and the earth of which we are a part, between groups and nations and between believers and God. Equality, civil rights, global warming, the survival of the planet, the end of war, famine, poverty and a sense of fulfilment and purpose which can only come when we are at home with God. These are the aims of ecumenism and we are still arguing about which hymn book to use or whether it should be real bread and unfermented wine, or the other way around. We might think these things important but there is a world out

there that, if it thinks about these things at all, shakes its head in utter incomprehension. If all the ecumenical movement achieves is more navel gazing and less attention to our calling to be the risk taking, outward looking disciples of Jesus then we have reached a dead end.

There have been some disturbing trends in recent years. The ecumenical movement has stuttered and the route we set out on all those years ago has discovered not only twists and turns but more than the occasional dead end. In the 1960's we believed that Local Ecumenical Partnerships were the forerunners of the coming church. We were pulling down barriers in the belief that unless as churches we could demonstrate unity then we had no right to talk of unity and peace to a divided world. What seems to have happened is that congregations and church structures have become frightened by the downward spiral in church attendance. Anxiety breeds loss of confidence and this infectious and corrosive mentality tends to make people look inwards rather than outwards. The dominant question becomes how do we hang on to what we have got rather than what more must we risk in order to be faithful to our calling as the people of God. In all denominations we have become concerned about our identity and the perceived erosion of traditional customs and values. The United Reformed Church was a product of those heady days and we have written into our founding documents a commitment to the visible unity of the church. I am well aware that there are those voices who say that the time for organic unity is passed and that there is no energy for wrestling over constitutions and bureaucratic structures. I am sympathetic to the desire for ecumenical mission but I still have a vision of a church released from the past to fully engage in God's future. We need to go on taking risks as God calls us to look outwards to expand the sense of what God might be asking of us.

It is not hard to discover the new ways in which ecumenism has found new expression and some of it we will explore today. There has been some convergence of spiritual expression from the insights of Iona and Taize and we should forget Corrymeela which made significant progress in overcoming religious division through liturgy and worship. Street Pastors are a visible sign on many of our streets of Christians setting aside differences to work together. Outreach in schools and among young people are other areas where the ideology of the past has been set aside in order to do something new. Theological discourse between denominations has built bridges although I am not sure how many people have had the faith and courage to walk over them. There is some evidence that the desire to find ways of expressing the challenge of faith to contemporary culture has stepped away from or around the divisions of the past. The whole reality of living in a country that no longer takes its identity from one faith let alone from a state church requires us to look at ourselves and the world around in different ways than the 1910 Edinburgh conference.

What I see is the emergence of grass root ecumenism, the kind of bottom up movement that Barak Obama so successfully harnessed and turned into an electoral organisation.