

## LAY PREACHERS AND THE COVENANT.

In this talk, I want to share with you some thoughts on the implications, in the widest sense, of the newly approved Anglican Methodist Covenant for Anglican lay readers and Methodist Local Preachers. Incidentally, when I wish to refer to both sets of preachers together I shall use the term lay preachers rather than readers and local preachers. I intend to go beyond the immediate practicalities of sharing in each others' ministries. I have already been assured by Dr Paul Avis, the Anglican national ecumenical officer, that there should be no problem over establishing the inter-changeability of readers and local preachers. From the Methodist side, I can say that I know of several circuits where there are joint Methodist/URC churches or LEPs where URC lay preachers preach on the Methodist plan and are welcomed as members of the Preachers' meeting. There will presumably be no reason why the same courtesy should not be extended to lay readers; indeed, for all I know, it may already be so in some places.

First, however, a few words about the Covenant. It establishes a new and relationship between our two churches, an ongoing pilgrim relationship which is designed to help us grow into fuller unity. Whether that fuller unity will take the form of two churches with totally integrated and interchangeable ministries but with continued parallel structures or whether it will lead to full organic unity remains to be seen and will be a matter for discernment by both churches under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. What is certain is that we have pledged ourselves to a mutually accountable relationship. We have recognised each other as authentic churches. We have pledged ourselves to 'realise more deeply our common life and to share the distinctive contributions of our two traditions', we have pledged ourselves to welcome each others' members into the fellowship and life of our churches, we have committed ourselves 'to continue to develop joint structures of oversight and decision making'. No doubt this last will be particularly important in areas of new growth where it would now be ridiculous to establish separate worship centres. Above all, we have committed ourselves to 'take account of each others' concerns, especially in matters that affect our relationship as churches'. This last may well prove particularly demanding of our mutual love and empathy. However, we must expect to have to exercise the same virtues of humility and patience in relationships between churches as we are called to exercise in relationships between individuals.

It is worth emphasising with the authors of the Covenant proposals report that there are important differences of style and practice *within* our two churches as well as *between* them; we may legitimately draw the conclusion that there are some within each church who will feel closer to a section within the other church than to some of their own co-denominationalists. At the risk of gross over-generalisation, one may say that three tendencies exist within both churches. There are those who have a more 'catholic' or 'sacramentalist' emphasis, those who have a more 'evangelical' one and those who take a strongly 'liberal' approach. These are not necessarily rigidly exclusive of each other and many within our two churches have been deeply influenced and enriched by elements from two or even all three of these traditions. Hopefully, we will all be involved in patient dialogue with each other, in every case seeking to learn how all the varying traditions to which our two churches are, in varying degrees, heirs, can help us become more faithful disciples of Christ, more faithful to the search for God's Kingdom. In recent years, great emphasis has been placed, in all the major churches, upon the understanding of Church as communion, fellowship, partnership. The Church is church because we are called to share in the love and the mission of the triune God. In our response to God's call, we are necessarily put in relationship with all others who similarly respond to that call. We are called to learn from

each other and to support each other in a joint act of obedience and pilgrimage. This act of joint obedience is not simply for our own sake or even that of the rest of the Universal Church, but also for the sake of the world that in our life it might discern in us a promising pattern of true relationships, enabled and engraced by the Spirit of God from which it can learn and benefit.

Both our churches emphasise the *interdependence* of all local churches. While we rightly value local congregational life, we believe that local churches are not islands, totally autonomous; rather, they need to learn from each other, support each other and share resources. Methodists call this connexionalism and practice it in the interrelationship of our circuits, districts and the Conference, but a comparable interdependence is also practised within Anglican dioceses and at wider levels.

Our new relationship as Anglicans and Methodists is a covenantal one, not a contractual one. It is one that we are called to remain faithful to, reflecting as far as weak human beings can the faithfulness in love of God Himself. While the matter of the approval of the Covenant was still sub judice, awaiting the joint decision of the Synod and the Conference, two Methodist minister friends of mine told me that Anglican colleagues had asked them why, given the current state and problems of the Church of England, Methodists should wish to make a Covenant with it. My answer was because we love our sister church, the Church of England and the worse its problems, whether they be objective or merely a matter of subjective feeling amongst Anglicans, the more we owe it to that church, in Christ, to love and cherish it. The fact is, of course, that both our churches face serious problems, but, in this secular age, we have not two missions but the one mission of the one Christ who sends us out just as he once sent the first apostles and disciples. Moreover, we are aware of our one call to the people of England. We share a common heritage and understanding. We are reformed branches of the one holy Catholic Church. We have now wish to do other than preach the faith once delivered to the saints. We cherish all the wisdom, enriching insights and forms of devotion and ministry since given to the Church that are consistent with that one apostolic faith. We recognise the need for constant reform in the Church and twice, once in the experience of each tradition, in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, that reform has proved fairly drastic.

So, we have much in common; at the same time, and even more importantly, there is a deepening of our common life and mission to which are called together, and, indeed, in partnership with all the other churches of Christ. At the centre of our consciousness, both as Christians seeking the will of Christ for the unity of His one Church, and as preachers, should be Paul's definition of his ministry in Ephesians (3:9) as being to 'make all people see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things', the plan being precisely one for the reconciliation of all things in Christ, that reconciliation being lent credibility in the eyes of the world by the way in which Christians *themselves* are reconciled across so many barriers of race, language, temperament, style and understanding in the one body. In Ephesians, 'Paul' presents us with a magnificent cosmic vision of what the Church, in God's plan and providence, is to be. Christians, united in one calling, one hope, one Spirit, one Body, one faith, one baptism and, supremely in the acknowledgement of the one universal Father, are to grow ever closer in love. Guided by the spirit of humility and patience in all their relationships and enriched by the mutual sharing of gifts with each other they are to grow up into the fullness of Christ. They are to be able to speak the truth in love, a phrase which is even richer than it sounds since the Greek means literally 'to do the truth in love' in other words to give an encouraging example to each other by the way in which they love and

serve, not simply by the way they speak or interpret. The truth, in this context, is far more than a matter of doctrinal formulae, Anglican, Methodist or even those deriving from the early ecumenical councils; it is a matter of life celebrated and shared, in deepening relationships that reach out into ever widening circles. It culminates in joy and praise.

It is worth reflecting on the implications of Paul's vision of unity in Ephesians. Unity is a process to be realised ever more fully and completely. It is a process inspired and enabled by the Spirit of God. Traditionally, we have often talked of unity as gift and calling. This has the merit of emphasising the indispensably divine and human elements in it. Unity is something we are given, by the one Christ who calls us together and thus relates us to each other in Himself. It is equally the gift of the Spirit who helps us to recognise the action of Christ in each other, under a multiplicity of forms of love, mission and service. Without these divine gifts there can be no true unity; yet, at the same time, these gifts have to be received, treasured and worked with. We sometimes think of the unity of the Church as something given and perfect at the beginning of the life of the Pentecostal community in Jerusalem., then lost and now needing to be recovered. A careful look at Acts shows however that the Church has always had to work at its unity and this is what Paul was inviting the Ephesians to do. The implication of verses 11-13 of this magnificent passage in Eph 4 is that, relying on the Spirit and using aright the gifts and ministries with which the Ascended Christ equips His Church we have to grow into unity, 'until we all attain to the unity of faith...to the stature of the fullness of Christ'. The great Methodist ecclesiologist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Benjamin Gregory commented that unity was the goal towards which the Church is both called and strives. The Decree Dei Verbum, 'On Revelation' of Vatican II says something similar when it talks of the Church meditating constantly on the word of God till 'all the promises of God are fulfilled in her'. We are on a pilgrim journey towards greater unity and holiness, towards being, as Paul puts it more 'fully knit together in love'. The life of the Church is dynamically orientated towards the goal of the final fulfilment of all God's purposes. We live as it were between epiphany, which literally means Christ's shining upon us as Light of the World and diaphany, a term coined and used alike by the two great French theologians, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who related it to the providential processes of evolution and by Paul Couturier who related it to the final unity and sanctification of all God's people. Its biblical justification can be seen alike in Ephesians and in John's promise, 'Brothers and sisters, it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he (ie Christ, at the fulfilment of all things) appears, we shall be like Him'(1 John 3, v.2). This is the great hope and vision in the light of which we need constantly to move.

Our world needs this vision. Just before Christmas I paid a flying visit to Belgium at the end of which my friend, Joseph Fameree, a Belgian theologian gave me a copy of a paper he had given at a meeting. It was entitled 'Sauver le bonheur'; this is difficult to translate exactly, but what he was driving at in it was the importance of recapturing for the world a true sense of joy, a sense to be distinguished from the mere ephemeral happiness of the satisfaction of immediate desires and characterised by an abiding sense of the divine goodness, present alike in creation, in the Incarnation and in the promise of the final consummation, in which, to quote Julian of Norwich, 'all manner of things shall be well'. It is this joyous and confident faith that should characterise all our preaching.

Paul's definition of the aim of his preaching ministry applies to all preachers, lay preachers as well as the ordained ministers of the Church. Together with them we share this responsibility. As lay preachers we share it in three particular ways. Firstly, in terms of the sheer amount of teaching for which we are responsible Sunday by Sunday. In particular, Methodist Local

Preachers are responsible for more than half of the services conducted in Methodism; this means that, especially in smaller churches, many of our people get the majority of their Sunday by Sunday teaching from local preachers. Anglican readers, whose numbers have increased greatly in recent years, may not be responsible for quite as high a proportion of services or sermons but there is no doubt that many clergy and parishes increasingly look to them for a very strong contribution. Secondly, there is the relationship between our lay state and involvement in the world and our preaching. We are in a position to relate the insights of an enormous range of locations in the society and the world of work to the Gospel. In particular, we have a responsibility to contribute insights from the many sub-cultures of life and work in which we are separately involved to the mission of the Church. We equally have a responsibility to contribute to the necessary critique of our society by the Gospel. Perhaps no civilisation is without elements that are capable of a very real Christian reception and affirmation; equally none yet has been without elements that the Gospel must refuse as incompatible with God's plan for a kingdom of justice and peace. Finally, there is the fact that almost all of us have other, often very considerable responsibilities within our local church communities and sometimes within the wider life of the Church; we have a leadership role in our communities even if it is more hazily and informally defined in the minds of our communities than is that of our ordained sisters and brothers. It is, however, real and its existence imposes on us a duty of helping to form sound and wise Christian awareness and opinion.

Paul tells us in Ephesians that the Church is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. This points us I think to the fact that the Church has and needs its recognised ministers of the memory of the Church, its ordained ministers, who succeed to the overall overseeing leadership of the Church but also that the Church needs its people of vision and special gifts. I am not suggesting that the latter, the 'prophets' can be exclusively identified with lay preachers; they include many, both within the ordained ministry and amongst other layfolk but we are amongst them with a very special opportunity and responsibility for contributing the vision we receive from our particular standpoint in life to the fullness of the Church's vision and understanding of that great plan of God.

If there is one thing that our world is in need of it, it is vision. We live in one of the most unidealistic generations since the early and mid- eighteenth century. You may feel that that represents a degree of healthy wisdom and that many of the ideals of the early twentieth century in particular took too little account of human sin and fallibility. However, I sometimes feel that, for all our technological progress, and, indeed, partly as a result of its helter-skelter speed which induces a sort of spiritual vertigo in us (at least it does in me!), we feel helpless and unable to control trends. Perhaps this was why the Japanese historian Fukiyama, wrote his book asserting that history had come to an end; the whole world had one ideal, to be rich and prosperous like the United States and there was no visibly credible popular alternative to that! To some extent, we in the British churches in general have lost our nerve. While our act on issues of world poverty has indeed sharpened up over the last generation, our critique of trends at home, for example the current popular press demonisation of Europe, the obsession with using bureaucratic methods and shoals of paper as a way of raising standards in education and elsewhere, the long hours culture, the increasing disparity between excessive executive salaries and the low pay of many workers, and many other things have largely gone uncriticised. This is, where Methodism is concerned, in contrast to the very able and wide ranging critiques of social inequality which used to be offered in the 50's and 60's by the old Christian Citizenship Dept. True, the Catholic bishops, with their magnificent document the Common Good issued at the time of the 1997 election

are a partial exception to my feeling that the Church has lost the plot in being able to critique contemporary society, at least partly because we have lost the vision by the light of which we can assess any human society. I must also admit that I am not as au fait as I should be with recent Anglican pronouncements on social questions and the work of relevant Anglican thinkers so I must not risk doing them an injustice. My overall feeling, however, is that the churches are short of wider vision at the moment and that we lay preachers need to play our part in restoring it to the Church.

I will close with a few practical points. There are things we can learn from each others' practice. I have noted that readers often share services with ordained Anglican ministers, sometimes, for example, preaching at a eucharist, where, of course, the priests as such must preside over the saying of the main eucharistic prayer. It is still pretty rare for local preachers to share services with ministers. In cases where there are largish circuits and few ministers and not enough local preachers, this is very understandable; it is just not practical. In others, though, there might be advantages to such sharing, allowing ministers for example to concentrate in certain weeks on other activities. I remember that many years ago, a friend of mine who was the stationed in Wimbledon Circuit told me that, in view of the fact that some local preachers were then grumbling that they did not have enough preaching there, a local preacher might once a month take one of his services in order to allow him to visit his junior Church about which he was then rather concerned. I gather the suggestion was met with shocked horror at the idea a minister should not be preaching absolutely every Sunday! We do need, from time to time, to look at those assumptions that we tend to take for granted and ask ourselves, are they really as right and necessary as we think. Are there situations in which we need, in the overall interest of deploying our total resources to the best effect, to be more flexible? Looking at patterns in another church may be a very helpful and suggestive exercise.

To conclude: I believe that we are at the beginning of a new and exciting phase of our relationship as churches. That new relationship has been approved by our respective highest governing bodies, but to bear fruit it must be lovingly received and developed at the local level. From what I have seen of the previously developing relationship of the diocese and the district, I am particularly hopeful that this will be the case in this area, and, maybe, an encouragement to others!

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This unpublished paper was given in the then London SW Methodist District shortly before my move to Bristol. I have included it (it is obviously not in my bibliography as such) as a tribute to the company of Methodist local preachers amongst whom I have ben privileged to serve)