

Christian disunity - the Archbishop's new approach

2. Where does the life blood of unity flow?

In this piece I quote more extensively from Dr Williams's addresses to show the route by which he has arrived at his new proposal and where he thinks the lifeblood of unity flows.

Listening to strangers. Dr Williams preached at his enthronement about secrets, based on Matthew 11: 25-30. "The gospel reading (Matthew 11: 25-30) we've just heard is about knowing and telling secrets, discovering a truth not everyone sees. In one way, nothing is hidden: Jesus has just been talking about what happens to the local towns that have seen his miracles and heard his words and yet haven't changed. It's as though the people in these towns haven't realised there is any mystery about who Jesus is; they look at what he does and they listen to what he says, yet they treat it as something they can think about at arms' length, an interesting phenomenon that has nothing really to do with how they live and die. And Jesus rounds on them and says, 'I don't want your idle curiosity or I don't want your patronage. There is a secret that you haven't a clue about - and the ones who know that secret are the ones who don't try to protect themselves by staying at a safe distance.' And he might equally round on us, in what used to be called 'Christendom' in the West, and say, 'You have seen everything, the truth has been displayed, and yet you too react with boredom or polite curiosity. It's all a bit too familiar, he says. Perhaps it's time for you to listen to some strangers.'

Seeing one another differently. 'We must turn to the children; the exhausted; the burdened and oppressed - they know the secret. Unless we know that we need life, we'll be baffled.....But what is this food, this life? Here's the deeper secret. To Jesus is given the freedom to give God's own life and love; and that life and love is bound up with knowing God the source of all as a father who holds nothing back, whose life is poured into Jesus so that Jesus can give it to the world..... And if we're not seeking to stand where Jesus is, our talk about God remains on the level of theory; nothing has changed.The one great purpose of the Church's existence is to share that bread of life.....The Church exists to pass on the promise of Jesus - 'You can live in the presence of God without fear; you can receive from his fullness and set others free from fear and guilt'Here is the secret of our true identity - we are made to be God's children and to find our most profound freedom in surrender to him. Once we recognise God's great secret, that we are all made to be God's sons and daughters, we can't avoid the call to see one another differently. No-one can be written off; no group, no nation, no minority can just be a scapegoat to

resolve our fears and uncertainties. We can't assume that any human face we see has no divine secret to disclose." (my emphasis)

Orthodoxy. "The Church of the future, I believe, will do both its prophetic and its pastoral work effectively only if it is concerned first with gratitude and joy; orthodoxy flows from this, not the other way around..."

Whose job is it to 'do' unity? That vision of the future is all of a piece with Dr Williams's four pillars preached at St Alban's. The making of formal occasions for recognising Jesus in others (pilgrimages, meetings for contemplative prayer, and so on (see Part 1) can be facilitated by our leaders; but doing the recognising is up to us. Gratitude and joy can not be done for us by our church officers. This is something of a reversal of roles; at very least it is a reversal of priorities. Up till now 'unity' - the important unity - has been about one institution merging with another institution, and this important bit of the unity process has been done for us by our ministers talking to ministers and priests of other churches. In Dr Williams's new vision every church member has to take part of the primary responsibility for the church's mission.

Where does that leave negotiations? Up till now the unity process has been driven forward by dedicated professionals negotiating the repair of divisions we have inherited from the past. The focus of the ecumenical conference at St Albans on the 17th May 2003 was specifically on the future - on the 'How' of unity in the next generation or so. It is, therefore, I believe, very significant that in putting forward 'four pillars' at that conference Dr Williams did not include among them negotiation leading to institutional merger. Negotiations seem to have been put on the back burner.

The superficiality of the way of negotiation. Dr Williams has in fact repeatedly registered his understanding that there are inadequacies in the way of negotiation. I do not suppose that he is about to dismantle the whole priestly unity industry in the Church of England, which has engaged and is engaging in negotiations about past divisions; but he has made it clear from the moment of his enthronement that he does not regard the way of negotiation for unity as dealing with unity at the deepest level. In his three addresses on the 27th February, the 17th May and the 13th July, to which I referred in Part 1 he has been saying things like this about inter-church talks: "To appeal or speak in the name of unity in the Church is very easily capable of slipping into the search for an appearance of meaningless unanimity" - "a depth in our search for unity that has not always been there when our talk about unity has been preoccupied with negotiation" - "Unity is therefore never simply the appearance of unanimity, it is never simply a matter of human agreement" - "An increasing sense that we're not simply negotiating our way

towards a formula that we can just about live with, but an awareness that what another tradition, just like another person, another believing person, may say is what I need to complete what I cannot say" - "shared vision in contemplation and pilgrimage and festival and service which remind us that negotiation about what has divided us is not where the lifeblood of unity flows". (my emphasis)

The lifeblood of unity, Dr Williams said this at the ecumenical conference: "Effective, real unity; unity that is in Christ is when we share in prayer and in mission at depth..... One of the great moments you might say in any enterprise of bringing Christians together is a recognition that the same act and gift of Jesus Christ is happening there as I believe and hope and trust is happening here. We do things differently, say things differently, and yet when we pray together there is a recognisability. We see the same action at work, the same eternal prayer being prayed, the same eternal gift being given. And so we need very simply to give ourselves plenty of opportunities for such moments of recognition." (my emphasis).

Dr Williams's new approach has profound implications not only for us but for our ministers. If we were to adopt it, it would affect both what we need our ministers to do for us in the coming years and what we should no longer need them to do for us at all. To start thinking about what we can contribute to the world's understanding of Jesus just as we are would, I suspect, involve a culture change for all of us in the URC. We have believed for many years now that God is calling us to be swallowed up in a larger unit by the way of negotiation ending in a formula on which we can amalgamate. That formula will inevitably not be one which sets out our beliefs, but one which, (in Dr Williams's words), 'we can just about live with' . This has bred a culture in which our community has not had to think through what it actively believes. We have lived in the expectation that what we actively believe did not ultimately matter, because our leaders would one day negotiate a deal on unity, and we would be urged to accept some more or less neutral formula about the nature of underlying reality as the best deal which 'the other side' is ever likely to offer us. If Dr Williams is right and he and others are looking to our community for some special insight into Jesus, the new vision demands that we enquire of ourselves whether there is some special insight which we share amongst ourselves and which we as a community passionately wish to share with others. We can not discover that without talking plainly to one another, but without rancour. If we discover that we as a community no longer dissent from Christians in other communities on any thing of importance, we could save ourselves a lot of time, energy and money on the road to unity by winding up our no longer dissenting denomination and throwing in our lot with the Church of England straight away, though there would be powerful reasons for not doing so. In the following pieces I look in a little more detail at some of the implications of Dr Williams's approach.

In Part 3, what sort of instrument would the URC need to be, if it were to take up Dr Williams's proposal?