

Cornerstone Covenant Service - 8th October 2017
Ephesians 4¹⁻¹⁶

Introduction

Today is a day of celebration, a day for renewing covenant, of joyfully recommitting ourselves to one another and to the mission and ministry to which God calls us.

And we are here to celebrate that covenant renewal in the 25th year of the dedication of this building, the Church of Christ the Cornerstone, hailed at the time as the “first city centre purpose built ecumenical church in the United Kingdom.”

And behind that, we celebrate the bringing together of five communities of faith, Baptist, Methodist, Roman Catholic, United Reformed and Anglican.

It is therefore a celebration of unity.

But just as this moment of covenant renewal looks back and celebrates all that has happened, so it also looks forward and wonders what the future holds and how life might be shaped in the years to come: what might be celebrated this time next year? What are we called to now? Where will each of us be this time next year? What are our hopes and dreams?

Ephesians 4

Curiously enough, the reading from Eph 4 has very similar concerns.

It's a passage which celebrates the church
but what is church for?

It's a passage which celebrates unity
but what is unity for?

It's a passage about calling
which challenges our sense of call.

It's a passage about how we live
which asks what shapes that living.

It's a passage which is concerned with hope
and what the future holds.

Hope

Indeed it is hope which provides the base on which all else stands. But this is not a ‘wishful thinking’ sort of hope, not an ‘it-would-be-really-lovely-if’ sort of hope, but a solid hope grounded in the purposes and the mission of God.

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all”. Eph4⁴

We are called to one hope, a hope set before us in God's purposes not just for the Church, but for the whole creation. And what is it that God purposes for his creation, what is the mission of God? According to Ephesians, it is this:

“to unite all things in {Christ}, things in heaven and things on earth.” 1¹⁰. Let me put that in its context in Chapter 1 “he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”

This is what God sets out to do, to bring everything together in Christ, to reconcile everything to himself in Christ. And if that is God's intention, it is also our hope, the one hope that belongs to our calling.

With that vast vision of the future which God has for us, our hopes are suddenly lifted onto a completely different plane, we begin to look at who we are and what we are about in the extraordinary broad context of God's harmonious future.

This hope is certain because it is grounded in God's future. This hope is the overarching goal to which everything we do is to bend; all the small projects, the little things of our life together, all, ultimately, are to be governed by this vast vision. This is what shapes our calling, this is what guides our living, that God's purpose is to bring all things together in Jesus Christ.

Church

So we can begin to see now why the unity of the Church is so important.

“There is one body and one Spirit.... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all and in all.” 4⁴

It is not that the unity of the church is an end in itself, it isn't, but that the unity of the Church is a sign of the reconciled future that God purposes for the whole of creation. It is not that Baptists and Methodists and Anglicans and Romans and URCs decide they want to be nice to one another, but that together they are a living sign of what might be possible for everyone, everywhere. Indeed a sign of what God intends for everyone everywhere.

And that means that it is not enough to share a building in worship, or even to bring five churches together. What is needed is that the life of the church overcomes its divisions, that we develop and continually work at our life together so that our unity is more than a marriage of convenience but a living reality that embodies God's future in the relationships we have with one another.

“I beg you” says Paul, “to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” 4¹⁻³

So the unity of the Church is not primarily about great ecumenical agreements, not primarily about the resolution of complex theological disputes, it is about our relationships, about our character, it is about humility, meekness, patience, love, peace, that deep commitment to one another which recognises that we are each those who are reconciled to Jesus Christ and thus also reconciled to one another. Why? Because it is that kind of character, that sort of relationship which marks the future which God intends for everyone.

I often wonder if the energy that is spent on resolving (or frequently not resolving) our theological differences were spent instead on nurturing our relationships, whether, in fact, the unity of the church would be better served, and so the living sign of God's future more obvious, more attractive.

And note carefully that there is a virtuous circle here. We long to be people who are humble, meek, patient, loving, peaceful and where else are we to learn such things than within a community of faith, a church, which values these characteristics, which will be patient and loving with us as we attempt to develop them? We long to be part of something which embodies God's future, which lives out the reality of reconciled, united life and how else to do that but to commit ourselves to others in

humility, meekness, patience, love and peace? Not only does a focus on God's future, the hope of our calling, challenge us to work at our unity as expressed in our relationships, but it begins to shape us as people, helps us to grow and deepen in character, in our very humanity.

Is this what Ephesians means when it looks forward to the point when

“we all attain the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, becoming mature people, reaching to the very height of Christ's full stature”? 4¹³

It would appear that our deepest hopes for ourselves as human beings are connected to the hope which is grounded in the reconciled future of God.

Mission

We can now begin to see what our calling, our mission is within the mission of God. If God's mission is to bring about a future in which all things are reconciled in Christ, if the unity of the Church is to be a sign of that future, then our calling is to embody that future in our life together.

This is the heart of mission. The first task of mission is not, surprising as it might seem, to go out into the world, but to be the Church of Jesus Christ. The Church as Church is an embodied witness to the future of God. This is why our life together is of such paramount importance, because it is that life together which is a witness to the future of God, a witness that such a future can indeed be real, that anyone can be a part of it. The ordinary life of the Church is the most extraordinary witness because it is a witness to the joyful, extraordinary future which God offers us in Christ.

And this is why mission is always essentially ecumenical mission, because at the heart of mission is that witness which is embodied in our reconciliation with God in Christ and with one another which is the unity we confess.

I am acutely aware that ecumenism has had a bad press of late, viewed as a barrier to mission, inward looking, bureaucratic; but I want to say that this is to misunderstand ecumenism which is concerned with the reconciled unity of our relationships which witness to God's future and is thus central to mission, central, indeed, to the mission of God. More than that, it is perhaps more accurately characterized as the goal of mission, the culmination of the task of mission itself which schools the activity of mission towards the end of the reconciliation of all things in Christ. Ecumenism is nothing less than what God sets out to achieve in Christ.

But we cannot stop here. If the first task of mission is that of the embodied witness of the Church to the future of God, it is not the last task. That witness needs to be explained, made known, made accessible, it needs to be articulated, made available in words. Look again at the text of Ephesians.

“{Christ's} gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and some teachers” 4¹¹. We tend to isolate such lists and view them as Church jobs for which, if possible, we need a rota. But notice that four out of five of them are about communicating, putting into words what Christian faith is all about. The apostle is, literally, a messenger, the prophet speaks forth the Word of God, the evangelist shares the gospel of Jesus Christ, the teacher explains the Christian faith. Taken together, we begin to see that our witness to God's future in Christ is not to just to be lived, but spoken about.

God wants to be known. He makes himself known in Jesus Christ, he makes himself available through the Holy Spirit, he forms a community which is a living witness to the future he would have for us and he wants that to be made known. We are called to share the faith as well as live it. Why would we not? If we have found in Jesus Christ a hope worth committing to, a reconciliation which liberates us to be ourselves, a life enhancing, life changing community how can we not share that discovery with those around us? Come and see, come and experience what the future of God might look like; come and find your most human self; come and discover the love of a God who would be reconciled with you! It is all here already; not perhaps in fulness, in maturity, but here nonetheless in the ordinary, everyday life of the Church.

Today, we have much to celebrate; a covenant, our unity, the gift of a splendid building.

How much more might we celebrate next year as we commit ourselves afresh to the one hope of our calling, the joyful future of God in Christ?

Amen

Rev. Canon John Robertson
October 2017