

## ***GOD'S GRACE – OUR TRANSFORMATION***

***An address at VCC Council Assembly, 28<sup>th</sup> July, 2005.***

***St Peter's Eastern Hill by the Rev Professor Robert Gribben.***

Last week, one of those bright and brilliant young people whom God gives the church from time to time was killed in a car accident, away up on the Gove Peninsula. His wife is equally a gift and gifted, a candidate for the Uniting Church ministry and my student. Wesley Church in Lonsdale Street was packed, upstairs and downstairs, full of young people, and a strong intercultural gathering, signalled by the smoke ceremony at the door as we walked in. This young man, at 24, had touched the lives of hundreds of people, and most obviously at the point of faith; his Christian faith drove everything he did as community youth leader, as actor, musician, poet, director of an arts company, worker for social justice, for reconciliation. There were tributes and stories, tears and laughter, and a pervading sense of terrible and tragic loss. As I listened to his story, I thought: we've hardly heard of this young man, but what promise there was! What he might have been in ten, twenty years' time! Here was an emerging Christian leader, thoroughly in the ecumenical mould.

Well, these dreadful things happen, but there were hundreds in that church, giving their thanks to God. And in the end, we must trust God to go on giving gifts to the Church, gifts of people for all the normal tasks, gifts of leadership: worshippers, teachers and students, workers for the church in different ways, explorers of new ways and protectors of old ways, discerners of truth, peacemakers, ecumenists. And the end of it all is in God's hands.

I was so delighted to be asked to come to a VCC Assembly after all these years, that I forgot to think what it would mean to talk about the future of ecumenism! That is a deep and wide subject, and takes one into the realms of future-prediction. I wish I had another subject, but let me make a start.

I have never had a moment's doubt that a central command of Christ for all Christians is the search for unity. It is illogical and in fact blasphemous for Christians to be disunited. The motto of the ecumenical movement draws the simple conclusion: unity is essential to fruitful mission. And examples of how God's work through the Church is weakened by disunity appear every day, and the media especially love to exploit them. This will continue. I also think that ultimately God's future means one Church – though I don't mean one giant organization, neither a Vatican nor a World Council of Churches, because I believe that ultimately the Church is much closer to all of us than that – unity is about (said the WCC years ago) the manifestation of the one, holy,

catholic and apostolic church in one place – the local place. Ecumenism starts at the ground-level; the other levels are merely to help that. So whatever the future is, your local congregation will be involved.

I hope, I suppose, for a Christian body (that's the best word) in which those of us of different Christian traditions and churches accept each other as true communities of Christ, true churches-in-disunity, and in which all members and all ministries are mutually accepted. That means diversity. As I have got older, I have come to value the different ways which the followers of Jesus have worked out of being Christian, but the trouble is that many of us think ours is the perfect way, and others are partial or strange or unacceptable. I would like us all to ask what special gift one tradition has which might be gift to another.

For instance. I was raised a Methodist. I loved the ways of my congregation at Shepparton, and the different ministry of my Ministers. I remember the seriousness of their preaching, and the solemnity of their celebration of the sacraments, as well as the cheerfulness which has always been a mark of the Methodists, and that made their youth work special too. And Methodism was musical – not the music I happen to prefer to listen to these days, on CD and in concert, but there was nothing like a congregation singing a Wesley hymn, say, 'O for a thousand tongues to sing'.

When I came to Melbourne for study, I encountered the Anglicans, first at the Cathedral, with choral music of a kind I'd only dreamed of, and the beauty and dignity of their services. I also snuck up here to St Peter's for a while, my first experience of vestments and incense, and walking around a sanctuary only taking right angles. I spent six months (before I candidated for the Methodist ministry) visiting each of the churches in the city in turn, amazed at the variety of their ways of worshipping God. Later I met Lutherans, and met Johann Sebastian Bach – and a Protestant Church with a crucifix on the altar. My curiosity was aroused, but most of all my sense of the richness of the Christian traditions. Still later, I learned from the Eastern Orthodox traditions, especially while I was General Secretary of the VCC, and at that time too I attended my first Quaker Meeting. I would not ever want to be a Christian without being in touch with this rich and amazing variety.

I remember once reading an encouraging word from the monk Thomas Merton. He wrote,

If I can unite in myself the thought and devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians. If we want to bring together what is divided, we cannot do so by imposing one division on another, or by absorbing one division into the other. If we do this, the union is not Christian. It is political and doomed to

further conflict. We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them all in Christ. Men such as St Seraphim, St Francis of Assisi, and many others, have achieved in their life the union of the Churches. [*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*]

And here's a point. What happens to those special ways of doing things if a denomination disappears? We experienced that in the Uniting Church. I think that for 20 years we've avoided all mention of the three distinct traditions who united in 1977, and we might have been wiser to keep some of the memories alive. Certainly the Methodist hymns have gone, and the rich theology and spirituality of the Wesleys which would have enriched us alongside that of Calvin. And if there were no Lutherans, Bach's chorales would go – not from musicians and concerts, but from their *liturgical* use, their use in worship. Part of the value of denominations is the preservation of the variety.

But that does not mean that denominations are the right way to be the Church, certainly not for the future. We need to find ways in which the lovers of this or that kind of music, or ceremony, or simplicity, can find a home for worship and service, and yet fully respect and accept others who find a different way – but a way not so different that it divides us in Christ. This is what one of the more recent unity proposals have been about – notably the 1982 UK one, where the Church of England, the Methodists, United Reformed Church and the Moravians planned to recognize each other as churches, accept each other's ministries, and work together with mutual exchange for say, thirty years with their denominational status still

separate, and then see what the Lord wanted them to do. The vote failed by a tiny number of clergy in a single denomination. A quarter of a century later, they are looking at the question again – but an historic moment was missed. That is something which the bi-lateral conversations across Australia and the world do very well, and we have had some notable Australian involvement – I think of Fr Peter Cross and Dr Charles Sherlock for a start (in ARCIC).

Of course, the problem is not actually a problem of ecumenism. It is a problem of the churches in the western world. If the churches were healthier, so would ecumenism be, I firmly believe. Ecumenism is not a very happy subject when churches are struggling to survive, and the lowest form of church unity is when we are forced together because we can't run by ourselves. That may well be a lesson the Spirit is trying to teach us. I don't doubt that that form of unity will be a major occupation in the next twenty years, because we simply cannot sustain the organization we set up in the grand old days. But perhaps we can find the spirit to see this coming together as a positive thing. My own church, especially through the work of Dr Robert Gallacher, has done much work to gather the various kinds of covenant whereby churches in local areas might share to the maximum degree – and you will hear more of this from my colleague Dr Sandy Yule in a moment.

The French have a saying, *reculer pour mieux sauter* – a stepping back in order to jump further. There is wisdom and no shame in that. We will never again make the leap we did in Europe in the Middle Ages, or even the spurt of the 1950s in the west. If the first was tied to imperial power and the second to middle-class mores, then that legacy is actually quite dangerous. We need to get used to the fact that we will be small, and weak, and vulnerable – and actually that is how the NT speaks

of the church – leaven, a flickering lamp on its stand, salt, seed growing secretly. The crusading days have gone, though the USA seems to carry it on politically – but the church taught them that word.

I think that the major challenge for us, both as members of our churches, and as members of an ecumenical organization, is to find people to whom we can hand on what we have learned, and why we think it is important. You don't need me to tell you that. We are dealing with a very different generation, one which finds attending committees and belonging to organizations which demand loyalty and time and effort, rather peculiar. They don't 'join'. A lot of what we have taken for granted organizationally (and theologically) is rejected, even by young people who are drawn to Christ. One thing is sure: we cannot force them to accept our heritage, our ways, our vision, but we can go on living with the enthusiasm which sparked our first efforts, and we can let that spark find its own dry tinder. That is why we need to keep meeting together, and watching carefully for those who are ready to hear – in their own way. Our business is to remain faithful.

The future of the Church is not in fact in our hands. The shape of the Church is not in our hands. In many ways, our ancestors got the church quite wrong, but the present unstitching is good, because it might be woven together in another pattern - God willing. We are living in a profoundly disturbing time, especially for those of us who remember a stronger church, but God will provide for his own future.