

Homily

Ecumenical Celebration of the Word - Building Bridges of Peace

Saint Mark's Cathedral, Port Pirie on Tuesday, 4th April 2017

Officiating Clergy:

Reverend Mary Lewis, Anglican Church
Pastor Brian Keller, Lutheran Church
Pastor Roger Kleinig, Baptist Church
Pastor Jenny Pryor, Baptist Church
Pastor Mark Broadbridge, New Life Christian Community Church
Reverend Ernest Sorensen, Uniting Church
Father Francis Montero, Catholic Church
Bishop Greg O'Kelly SJ, Bishop of the Diocese of Port Pirie

My brothers and sisters, we gather to celebrate our faith as the People of God in praise and worship in this year of the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther nailing the 95 theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg, the symbolic commencement of the Reformation.

The image on the screen above is that of the Diet of Worms in 1521, whose resulting Edict described Martin Luther as “a notorious heretic”. The picture above says it all – the finger pointing, division on different sides of the hall, Martin Luther standing there defiantly, the Bishops in their mitres regarding him with disdain and even malevolence. There was a great gulf, there was huge division, and these controversies began to involve the Princes, and there ensued a hundred years of wars, of slaughter and persecution. The unity of the western Church was broken asunder. Here we are now, joining together in a service entitled “Building Bridges of Peace”, and we come as people who support each other and esteem each other.

On the 26th February this year (2017) Pope Francis visited the Anglican Church in Rome, the first Pope to do so. In his address to that congregation he said

You have invited me to bless the new icon of Christ the Saviour. Christ looks at us, and His gaze upon us is one of salvation, of love and compassion. It is the same merciful gaze which pierced the hearts of the apostles, who had left the past behind and began the journey of new life, in order to follow and proclaim the Lord. In this sacred image, as Jesus looks upon us, He seems also to call out to

us, to make an appeal to us: “Are you ready to leave everything from your past for me? Do **you** want to make my love known, my mercy?” His gaze of divine mercy is a source of the whole Christian ministry.

“.... His gaze of divine mercy.’ Pope Francis often refers to the gaze of Christ, as recorded in the Gospels when He looks at the rich young man, when He calls the apostles, when He looks at the crowds who are like sheep without a shepherd. On three occasions He gives a special gaze to Peter, who represents all of us. The first gaze was when He said you are Simon, but now you are Peter, a gaze which conferred vocation. Then was the gaze He gave Peter as He was being led away for scourging, and as Peter had just denied Him thrice. It was a gaze that cut Peter to the heart, and he went out and wept bitterly. What Christ gave was the gaze of forgiveness. Then after the resurrection Jesus calls Peter out and looks at him steadily and tells him to feed His lambs and to feed His sheep. It is a gaze conferring mission. Ministry, forgiveness and mercy, mission. Pope Francis said that Jesus gave the same merciful gaze which pierced the hearts of the apostles, who left the past behind... This is crucial for us as Churches. We must not deny that there remain significant differences between our Churches, but in truth we must leave, and largely have left, the disgraceful practices of division that marked us. On the Catholic side we came from a setting where a young Catholic woman could not be a bridesmaid at a non-Catholic wedding. At funerals Catholics were required to stay out of earshot, on the edge of the crowd. In what we called “a mixed marriage” it was not allowed to be celebrated in front of the altar, but was conducted in a side room, in the sacristy. There would have been negative features coming from the Protestant side too, of course. Catholics were regarded as idolaters, Mary worshippers, and for some the Pope was anti-Christ. But there is one question I have to ask Pastor Keller, our Lutheran Pastor, what Martin Luther meant when talking of his visit to Rome in 1510 when he said “I went with onions, and returned with garlic”! On the other side, the Jesuits at Sevenhill argued to increase the size of their property because they were being surrounded by “nests of Methodists”!

The source of practice I have just described occasioned great hurt and division, and that is why our litany has spoken about the stones that were built into a wall of division. We refer to a lack of love, the stone of discrimination, the stone of persecution, the stone of pride, the stone of broken communion. All these divided us, often bitterly.

Despite this the Spirit stayed alive in a fragmented Church. There were always people of good will. Mention has been made several times that ecumenism has been easier to practice in the country than in the cities, as the smaller communities know each other, and can see the good in each other. Even in the darkest of days there are so many

examples of good will – the first Catholic priest in Tasmania going most nights to smoke his pipe in the company of the Anglican vicar.

It seems to me that the changes for the better began in the late sixties, when greater ecumenism was encouraged by Vatican II, and Catholics began to move out of their fortresses. I recall how the Lenten discussion groups commenced in the sixties. They were ecumenical, and taken up with great enthusiasm by so many people from the different Churches. It was almost as if the people were waiting for the opportunity to show their esteem for each other.

More recently, I think ecumenism has acquired a new energy as people realise that ecumenism is not about one Church succumbing to another, of one Church collapsing to be absorbed by another, but of doing together whatever we can, and of growing in the strength of the realization that it is the person of Jesus who unites us. Our proclamation of Christ and His message is something we all endorse, and that is something that transcends any divisions. Certainly, thank God, gone is the hate.

We need to discover anew what the Christian vocation means in an increasingly secular society, a world where a knowledge of the person of Jesus is in many cases growing dim. To this we must bring our witness of ministry, mercy and mission.

Hence we look at what Isaiah taught us in the First Reading, that we have the ideals of beating the swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks, to help produce a society where the lion lies down with the lamb. This is not just fantastic poppycock; these images speak to our hearts, of what it is to be an authentic human community, where justice and peace are the ideals, and the readings such as Isaiah reminds us of what is at the base of our hearts as we work to live the Gospel ideals. Then there is Paul speaking to the Corinthians that if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation, that we are all reconciled in Him, and therefore the least we can do is pray together. God has given us all the ministry of reconciliation, and we have the awesome vocation that He expresses that we are ambassadors for Christ; “it is as if God is making His appeal through us”. And there is the Gospel image of the vine and the branches, an image which speaks for itself, and which reminds us that none of us can bear fruit if separated from the vine. The vine is an image of growth, of life, of Eucharist. And then there is the awesome final line of the reading from Saint John – as the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. That is too much for us to take in, that we are loved by Christ with the same love the Father has bestowed on Him.

We are at an amazing point in this five hundred year pilgrimage since the Reformation. One cannot help but think wryly of how far we have come. From the Catholic point of

view, there was enormous opposition at the time of the Reformation to the idea of the liturgy in the vernacular, of Scripture being made readily available to all the faithful (because they would misunderstand it!) and that the laity should not participate in the chalice at the Eucharist. All of these have changed. Of more significance is the common acknowledgement of the validity of our baptisms, and how one looks at the notion of the priesthood of all believers. When Martin Luther preached that doctrine it was described as a recipe for chaos and anarchy. The understanding among Catholics at that time was the status of the clergy and religious was a higher one than that of the laity, and the idea of a priesthood going beneath them was anathema. Then in 1964 Vatican II decreed in *Lumen Gentium* that the clergy and laity are equal partners as the People of God, equals rooted through baptism in a shared priesthood, lived out in different ways. Remarkable growth.

I believe our Assembly on Building Bridges of Reconciliation has been a scene changer for us. We cannot go back after this event, but must progress forward together. Pope Francis has been a scene changer for us. He visited the Anglican Church in Rome, and now has accepted an invitation from the Sudanese people that was extended both to him and to the Archbishop of Canterbury to go together to Sudan. And he went on the 31st October 2016 to Stockholm, Sweden, to celebrate the anniversary of the Reformation in the Lutheran Cathedral there. This was particularly significant, as at the time of the Reformation every one of the Scandinavian Bishops became Lutheran, so a visit from the Bishop of Rome to pray there on such an occasion had much symbolism. After these events, as this pilgrimage of unity goes forward, the whole scene has been changed for the better.

May we take to heart what the Pope said when he visited the Anglican Church of All Saints in Rome

If we recognise our weakness and ask for forgiveness, then the healing mercy of God will shine in us and will be visible to those outside; others will notice in some way, through us, the gentle beauty of the Face of Christ.

Let this be our prayer. Amen

Bishop Greg O'Kelly SJ
Bishop of the Diocese of Port Pirie