

Receptive Ecumenism (11-15 January, 2009)

Some Concluding Thoughts

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Once again we find ourselves in the Bleak Midwinter of ecumenism: it is as though God has provided an allegory in our physical circumstances - mid-January in the one of the longest cold snaps in living memory, at a time of financial crisis. Words and phrases like 'blockage', 'impasse' and 'dead end' echo in our ears and many find it hard to know how to put one foot in front of the other by way of progress. We may even, as this conference began, have had our doubts whether our hearts would be warmed again. It was in this mood that many of us heard Don Bolen's nuanced sketch of progress so far. Some acute points followed shortly from John Gibaut, the Director of Faith and Order. While greeting the new initiative warmly he wondered what was to become of the *old* ecumenism. What is the relationship between 'receptive' and 'reception'? He noted that 'While the authors of *Receptive Ecumenism* accord a place for ecumenical dialogue, there is not a corresponding interest in their formal reception as such. ' Might this not appear an ecumenical 'soft option' for those impatient with the pace of formal reception? John Gibaut, invoking Mary Tanner, noted that it is not that ecumenical dialogues have failed, rather on the whole it is in the realm of formal reception that the stumbling blocks lie: 'The churches have not kept pace with their official and formal bilateral and multilateral agreed statements, too many of which lie dormant on the desks of ecumenical officers, archives and libraries. After nearly half a century, not enough of these agreed statements

have been formally received, let alone received as ecumenical learning.’¹ Reception must of course be many-layered, and cannot only mean canonical approbation – but formal reception of agreed statements must be part of the goal of any ecumenical venture. If formal reception does not make up at least part of the agenda for Receptive Ecumenism then anxiety remains as to whether it is an ecumenical ‘soft option’. Paul Murray came back immediately, punching hard but as always tactfully.

By way of response Paul Murray stressed that Receptive Ecumenism is an exercise in ‘strategic pragmatism’, concerned with what can be done now. For instance we can look at our own communion’s dysfunctions. Receptive Ecumenism, Murray added is ‘deliberately ad hoc’. Now ‘deliberately ad hoc’ is something of a surd: we are accustomed in the ecumenical movement to being ‘deliberate’ – to five-year plans, mission statements, and so on, whether in public or in church life. We are not used to being ‘deliberately’ ad hoc.

The session on Scriptural Reasoning with David Ford and Peter Ochs began to sketch the contours of this new country. They insisted that in this project Scripture was studied ‘for its own sake’ and not instrumentalized – one did not, that is, read Scriptures together with Jews and Muslims in order to solve the Middle East problem, or improve the position of women, or whatever. Implied by this was the need to abandon all pretensions to know where we are going. The application to ecumenical work seemed to be this: the first generation of ecumenical scholars seemed to believe (and how could they do otherwise?) that once doctrinal differences were resolved (nature and grace, the primacy of Rome, the status of the Virgin Mary and so on) the denominations would

¹ I am grateful to John Gibaut for supplying me with a copy of his text.

happily flood through the ecumenical gates, but this has not been the case. Differences have been resolved, but distance remains. However we shouldn't yet let this apparent failure of five year, or twenty-five year plans deafen us to the steady drip, drip, drip of the ecumenical thaw. John Bradley, for instance, reminded us that 30 years ago evangelicals were part of the problem, and now they are part of the solution. Joe Aldred pointed to the emergent importance of the contribution of the Black led and Pentecostal churches.

Are even our failures a sign of success? Or is this just the sort of thing one would say to make the best of things? I think not - God's ways are not always our ways.

Augustine has some relevant reflections. His treatise, 'On Christian Teaching' (its first part written early in his ministry and at the same time as his writing of the *Confessions*) treats of the interpretation of Scripture. Here we have the newly appointed Bishop, gathering his people around the Word, as Susan Wood has enjoined us to do. In prefatory remarks Augustine notes that some will say that they do not need go to church and hear the preacher, for God conveys all spiritual truth directly into their minds. Or some will say that they can read Scriptures without any help, since God makes its meaning clear to them directly. Certainly, says Augustine, these people have received a very great gift!.... But let them remember that it was from *other people* that they learned to read and write – and even to speak! – in the first place. God could, he continues, have placed all true knowledge of himself in our minds directly, by mean of angels. But instead he has made things such that we must learn from one another – so that we may be bound to one another with ligatures of love. We must learn from one another – how to speak and how to listen. As Jeff Astley so aptly reminded us – we don't always *know* 'what we don't know'. We need to learn from the local, as Jenny Bond reminds us.

Rather than leaping instantly from the drafting committee to full visible unity this slow, sometimes painful process of listening and learning may be God's will, that we may more deeply bound to one another by the ligatures of love. In remaining, even restively, with separateness we may learn to appreciate more fully the riches of our differences.

Christ is always with us in this, even is we don't always see him.

Finally, and appropriately, let me turn to eschatology which has been a significant feature of our meeting. As Susan Wood reminded us, the church is eschatological in the here and now, and not just the hereafter.. It is with us as the known Unknown: sought, glimpsed but not fully comprehended.

We need to be attentive, to STAY AWAKE as the disciples were called to do in the Garden of Gethsemane, and famously didn't. We need to listen and to look for 'what might emerge'. It was interesting that when we came to the session on the Durham based local project and Paul Murray was asked – where did the initiative come from? - his answer was that 'it just emerged' . It emerged from the local community and that was the key to its success. We need all to be attentive, to see what will emerge, and then be midwives to the birth.

Bernard of Clairvaux in his Sermons on the Song of Songs finds himself explaining to his monks why it is we don't always see Christ when spoken of in Scriptures for instance, as the Beloved the Song of Songs, and even when he appears. He notes that the disciples did not immediately recognize the risen Christ: Mary Magdalene mistook him for the gardener, and the disciples on their way to Emmaus only recognised him when he broke the bread. How can it be, Bernard asks, if God is one and always the

same, that we do not always recognize him? This, Bernard explains, is not God's fault but our own, for we cannot yet see Christ as he is? In support he invokes I John 3.2:

'Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.'

Bernard has notified the wonderful double-modesty of this passage – we do not yet know who we are, because we have not – yet - seen the full glory of the Lord.

In the meantime we go forward as beloved and as God's children, in the knowledge that darkness does not mean the absence of light, nor winter the absence of spring, seeking always the face of Christ so that, knowing him fully, we may come to know ourselves.