

Sermon for Sunday 2nd October 2009 - 'Life in the Fellowship of the Church'

The Basis of Union of the United Reformed Church sets out a procedure for the admission of people who want to join the church and who satisfy the Elders' Meeting that they are sincere. The Elders commend them to the whole membership assembled in a local Church Meeting, and once that Meeting has agreed, the candidates are admitted publicly 'to the full privileges and responsibilities of membership of the Church of Jesus Christ and in particular to the membership of the local church'. Many of us have been admitted ourselves in this way; others have seen it happen. And if you have, you may recall that candidates for admission declare not only their faith and trust in God and their discipleship of Christ; they also respond positively to the following question, or words to the same effect:

Do you promise, in dependence on God's grace,
to be faithful in private and public worship,
to live in the fellowship of the Church and to share in its work,
and to give and serve, as God enables you, for the advancement of his kingdom throughout
the world?

October is a month of some significance in the life of all churches of the Reformation, our own in particular. The end of the month sees Reformation Day, the anniversary of Martin Luther's public denunciation of abuses in the practice of the medieval church - the courageous step that made Christians everywhere think long and hard about questions of authority, about the relationship between man and God. This particular October falls within the quincentenary year of Luther's famous sparring-partner John Calvin, whose sophisticated thought on the scriptural basics of Christian faith and in particular on the nature and organisation of the church left such a strong legacy to our Reformed tradition. And today, the first Sunday of the month, is the day commended to local churches by our own General Assembly as a day of Rededication - a day when we can think of our own calling, both as individual Christians and as a community, and commit ourselves afresh to what that calling means.

It seemed therefore appropriate that we should use this opportunity to think particularly what it might mean when one gives a promise 'to live in the fellowship of the Church and to share in its work'.

Both our readings and our hymns this morning have focussed on biblical understandings of community. The story of Jacob's dream told of a ladder, a link between earth and heaven, coupled with a promise by God to Jacob and his descendants, similar to the one earlier made to Jacob's grandfather Abraham. The Jewish understanding has always been that one becomes a member of God's people primarily by birth - being born 'within the covenant', as heir to the understanding reached between God and a whole nation linked by descent from Abraham and Jacob. The child of a Jewish mother is in Jewish eyes a Jew, even if it does not know of its own heritage or take any steps towards the actual practice of religion.

Paul, writing to the Christians of Rome, set out another idea in the passage we heard earlier: one of the great Reformation themes, 'It is by our faith that we are put right with God'. Once faith enters into the equation, a trusting and loving relationship with the Creator known through Jesus Christ, then it no longer matters whether one is descended from Abraham or not. For Paul the most important thing was

acceptance of the Gospel message, which in turn required a messenger – ‘How can they hear if the message is not proclaimed?’

Calvin built his understanding of the church upon both of these ideas. He emphasised with Luther the crucial role of faith – for both great Reformers, the Church known to God was the company of all who accepted salvation in Christ and knew that inner relationship with a loving Maker. Yet at the same time he defended the baptism of young children born within believing homes, applying to a Christian context that Genesis notion of birth ‘within the covenant’. Baptism was a sign of Church membership; but it was not wrong to baptise those too young to make a conscious profession. Today we treat our young people in many ways as part of our fellowship here, because through their families and those who care for them they are indeed heirs to the message that we, with the years, have found to be true and meaningful.

What then of those who have neither a religious upbringing nor any story of a great ‘conversion moment’ to tell? Here at City Church we do our best to welcome the people who walk through our doors regardless of background. To the asylum-seeker with no intention of departing from Islam our building may be associated with basic foodstuffs or practical advice. To the person of no faith but many troubles we would, I very much hope, offer a listening ear and the sense that others care. To someone reeling from rejection in another Christian community we might show the Church’s affirming face. To somebody who would like to believe but really isn’t sure how far they can go with miracle stories, inherited structures and authority claims, we say ‘Just be a friend for now – stay in touch, let us know if we can help, if we can explain’. There is no time limit for seeking membership of our community, and as Jesus’ parable of the labourers in the vineyard reminds us, God is equally happy to accept someone who joins the work at the eleventh hour.

Calvin did indeed reflect upon salvation, upon the individual’s relationship with God, and hence upon the company of saints, the invisible fellowship of all those who know such a relationship. But he also reflected – at much greater length than Luther – on the institutional church, the visible fellowship of those who profess their Christianity aloud and come together in worship and service. It is from him, through the Presbyterian strand in our heritage, that we take our notion of the scriptural offices of pastor and elder, and (through all strands) the collegiate nature of our church decision-making – that oversight belongs not to charismatic individuals but to prayerful gatherings of fellow-believers or elders who know the local situation.

In the tradition that has come down to us since Calvin’s day, through Genevan and Scottish and English filters and by reception here in Wales, the local church is the way in which the whole church of God makes itself visible. Those who become our members here are admitted not just to the membership of City Church Cardiff, but ‘to the full privileges and responsibilities of membership of the Church of Jesus Christ and in particular to the membership of the local church’. Those of us who advise potential members, who propose names to the Church Meeting, and all of us who welcome new members into our midst, do not just act as a club of some 40 or 50 or 100 people: what we do is done on behalf of the worldwide Christian fellowship even though many within that fellowship may not recognise the force and significance of our action. Taking on new members, though we do it with pleasure and celebration, is quite a responsibility.

The actual procedure for taking on new members points up another difference of emphasis in the Reformed tradition. Because of our location and the gathered nature of our congregation this may be less apparent here than elsewhere; but typically the admission to full privileges and responsibilities of membership is a rite of passage – something that happens in early adolescence – at the same age, therefore, as the Catholic and Methodist and English Prayer Book practice of Confirmation. Much of what we do with young people approaching that age is similar to the Confirmation practice of other churches. We prepare them, we encourage a prayerful decision to take this step, we put certain questions to them before the congregation; we may even lay hands on them (though that is not required). But there is a contrast.

We don't see the main point of the rite as being strengthening with the Holy Spirit through the agency of the presiding minister, nor as a personal renewal of promises made for one in baptism. The fact that the Church Meeting must approve every Admission, and the fact that if necessary an Admission can be repeated (for example if a person drifts away from the church and seeks, years later, to return) both show that what we are doing is not a two- but a three-way process, involving God, the new member and the receiving church. Church membership has a spiritual significance, but it also has the quite down-to-earth element of joining a concrete organisation, agreeing to play one's part – indeed also submitting to the authority constituted within that organisation. Once upon a time, addition to an Elder's pastoral list meant not only that the Elder would visit, help and advise in times of need, but also that the Elder would warn, admonish and report: the Elders' or the Church Meeting was a place of discipline and some part of the business of many Synods and some Assemblies was taken up with appeals by members found not to have lived up to their promises. We have generally moved away from that approach today, but we do well to remember that one takes on responsibilities as well as privileges on joining such a fellowship.

Happily the problem in modern times is often not so much that people don't want to do right by the fellowship they have joined, but that they're not fully aware of all that there is to do. But here both our readings and our hymns come to the rescue. The Church, wrote Carol Ikeler in our last hymn, is wherever God's people are praising; wherever disciples of Jesus remember his story and walk in his way, caring for neighbours, sharing the words of the Bible 'in gift and in deed'. We attend public worship, not just because we feel like it but because it is part of our commitment. We listen to the Bible and ponder the reflections offered to us; we look out for each other and for the community in which we are set; we let others know of the faith that inspires us – 'How shall they hear without a preacher?', remember.

These are tasks of the whole fellowship, not just of ministers or even of elders; which is why City Church has ministry groups of ordinary members, specialising in particular aspects of our activity like worship, education, or the interaction of church and society. Although we have a pastoral ministry group too, we all share some pastoral responsibility – to make strangers welcome, to see that lonely or confused or hospitalised people are visited, to listen when a listener is needed whether in church or in our workplaces. Some of us have gifts we might consider using for the Junior Church or maybe in the musical field. And because the Reformed Churches work through collegial decisions, participation through the Church meeting is as much a responsibility of members as a right. Last week's Church Meeting would, I believe, have been quite an eye-opener to anyone who had attended for the first time; not

only in how constructive it was but also in the range and variety of the topics that came up. The church really does seek to make its decisions together.

Prayer, presence, participation, and also giving – because no organisation functions without resources and plenty are required to support all we do – are all aspects of what it means ‘to live in the fellowship of the church and to share in its work’. Not everyone can do everything; some have barely enough to live on, some are short of musical talent or nervous of public speaking, some may be bedridden or have Sunday jobs. Between us, however, we have the ability to discharge all of the tasks of Christ’s church, and we are called to do so. Our guests and adherents, who join us Sunday by Sunday or just on occasion, can share in almost everything we do and their willingness to do so is greatly appreciated. But for members it is a commitment to do what one can, which is why membership enables the fellowship to rely upon bills being paid and every aspect of our communal ministry being covered.

The last act in the admission of a new member is Communion. We normally admit members on Communion Sundays, so they can seal and symbolise their full belonging immediately afterwards by sharing in the Lord’s Supper with the rest of the fellowship. We don’t confine communion to members because we believe all are welcome at the Table and it isn’t for us to determine who is worthy and who is not. But the sacrament is nevertheless a bond, between those who share it as much as between the communicant and God. Let all of us now, therefore, members adherents and guests alike, be mindful of the fellowship in all its many aspects as we move into the meal common to all Christians, the gift of our Master and Founder, to hold all his followers together in memory of him.