

Forum address

Let me begin then, in the brickyards of Egypt. The Hebrews are in Egypt, slave labour for Pharaoh and his class, churning out bricks. You'll remember the story. God hears the groaning of his people in exile, calls Moses, the murderer with a conscience, and sends him to Pharaoh. Demand one: let my people have time off to make sacrifice. Not on your life, says Pharaoh, the lazy swine simply don't want to do any work. Religious observance is a smoke screen for idleness and rebellion.

We'll show them, just for their insolence in asking we'll stop supplying them with straw, the essential ingredient for bricks. They can go and forage for it themselves and still produce the same quantity of bricks. Egyptian managers and Hebrew workers alike are caught up in the fear and anger that informs Pharaoh's politics and economics and flung around in a vortex of oppression, violence and despair in the brickyard. The underlying theological question is, who is in charge of the brickyard? Is it Pharaoh and the unseen but very real powers of anxiety and economics that inform his behaviour, or Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews? The smart money was on Pharaoh. Yahweh was at best a long shot. But, contrary to expectation, come Exodus chapter 8 when the wizards of Egypt are locked in combat with the servants of Yahweh, a plague of gnats descends, and try as they might, the magicians can't cope. There is something that the powers-that-be cannot do. Unheard of. Their power is broken. God, it transpires, is Lord of the brickyard. The gospel of liberation that reaches its climax on the cross begins here, in the brickyard, with the God who has heard the cry of his oppressed ones.

This is the big story of the Old Testament. Its an amazing story. Its about the exchange of one command for another – the command of Pharaoh for the command of Yahweh, the God of Israel. The slaves of Pharaoh become the servants of God (Lev 25:42), but there is a profound difference. Whereas Pharaoh owned to oppress, Yahweh owns to liberate, and he sets out to offer a profoundly different kingdom to the brickyard.

As the story of God's people unfolds, the implications of that difference are spelt out. First and foremost, they begin to learn who God is - I'm the God who saved you from the brickyard – so no other God than me, OK? Or to put it more theologically, all other authorities are de-absolutised. There is one authority in the universe, the Lord of the Passover, the Father of the Lamb of God. No others. I can't be used, I'm not a category, I'm Me, I am who I will be. No statues, no oaths, none of that can even begin to reach towards an understanding of who I am. But you know because I'm the one who liberated you from the brickyard.

And once they've learnt who God is, they learn who they are and how they have to treat each other and their world. You've got to live together, God tells them, all of you in one big nation or society, and if that's going to happen everyone needs their own space, safety and liberty. So the weak need protecting from the strong and the acquisitive capacity of the individual is limited - look after your parents, no killing, no adultery, no stealing, no false witness, no coveting.

And once they've discovered who they are, they discover something about what creation is for and life is about – remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. At the

core of creation is an invitation to rest. And how those slaves in the brickyard would have yearned for that.

And once the nation of Israel has grown up and had time to think and turn its experiences of God over and over, its distinctive understanding reached beyond itself to other nations – they were strangers in Egypt, so they must share their harvest with foreigners (Dt 14:28). Because God's kingdom is so different to Pharaoh's, there must be a remission of debt every 7th year, and every 50 years (after 7 lots of 7) there will be a Jubilee year, when the soil will lie fallow, the land will return to its original owner or his heirs and slaves be set free. Whatever else is going on here, the principle is clear - all economic and business transactions are being relativised for the sake of the wider community. God is God, and God does not rule the economic brickyard like Pharaoh.

This is the big story of the Bible. God is the one who comes to set free, to liberate the brickyard. At one level that story is about politics and power and economics and ways in which brickyards are created and governed – it is to do with the way we treat the earth and its inhabitants, with climate change, and violent crime, and the ways in which we fashion community. And make no mistake, God does not treat such things lightly. Remember Amos railing at the wealthy who had sold the poor for the price of a pair of sandals, Micah reminding us what the Lord requires is that we do justice, love kindly and walk humbly with our God, and most terrifyingly of all, that the goats depart to the outer darkness protesting, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or a prisoner...?'

But at another level, this is the template for that greater act of liberation, that freeing of humanity from the confines of space and time and death, into a mysterious, abiding, beautiful, incomprehensible communion with the Father in the life of the Son through the power of the Spirit. Easter in the heart's brickyard.

[Eagleton?]

Jesus is the one who sets us free from the relentless grind of brickmaking, who lifts our feet off the treadmills of conformity and false necessity, and sets us down in God's alternative kingdom to enjoy the wonderful strangeness of God. Wonderful strangeness, because God does not order things like we do.

Ours is the culture of the market, so pervasively so that we don't even notice. Its like the air we breathe. The language of the marketplace is everywhere – 'I don't buy that' we say, 'what are the costs and benefits' we ask. Consumer surveys classify religion as a 'leisure pursuit'. Christians 'shop around' for a church that suits them. The institutional church, we are told is 'struggling to stay in business'. 'Pick n'mix' spirituality is the rage. We have Mission 'audits' and even that most excellent website, The ship of fools, has a mystery worshipper to replace the marketeer's 'mystery shopper'.¹ All hail the market. All hail the consumer.

¹ Inspired by John Cole 'Church –without price?', a paper produced for work with Anglican deaneries.

There's an art shop just round the corner from my office which produced a little poster when the Prime Minister was trying to persuade us to spend our way out of recession . Kitchener's face peers out, 'Shop', its says, 'its your patriotic duty.'

'Come', Isaiah hears God say:

Everyone who thirsts,
Come to the waters;
And he who has no money,
Come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
Without money and without price...(Is 55:1-2)

Come to God's genuinely free lunch, and begin to experience the wonderful strangeness of the kingdom. God's ecology of divine abundance deliciously subverts the culture of the market, because in God's kingdom there is no scarcity. In God's kingdom there is grace for all, love overflowing. In his kingdom we are loved unconditionally, through no merit or goodness of our own. God is like that. And that love is for everyone. God intends it to reach to the ends of the earth and back. Its scandalous, its shocking, its subversive. It offends all good meritocrats. We humans just don't organise ourselves like that. But God does.

And the church is the herald of that subversive, life-enhancing, humbug-lancing love. The church is the community of the companions of Jesus, that wine-bibbing friend of sinners who so scandalised the proper and the religious. For in him, the church eventually worked out, that scandalous love, which is the very being of God, was made flesh. And for those of you who are wondering what all this has to do with ecumenism – that is the root of our unity, members together of the body of Christ. Forget that, forget that our unity is rooted in the passionate love of God that is the only alternative to the slavery of brickyard, and you can forget the whole exercise. Forget that our unity is rooted in the life that we share in Christ, and the whole thing falls apart, because we forget that unity and mission are parts of the same Christ-like reality. Christ is not divided.

At Pentecost this year I had the privilege of preaching at a CT in Dorset service at Wimborne Minster. As part of the liturgy, groups brought symbols of their work within the community – there were the fluorescent jackets of street pastors, gardening tools from a group that worked on improving the environment, cooking implements from those that ran lunch clubs and night shelters. By the time the procession had finished the area around the altar was piled high with symbols. And if you want to know how mission and unity hang together – that's how: Christians together, churches together making a difference in God's world, for Christ's sake. I've picked on Dorset because I was there, but I receive many of your newsletters from around the country, so I know that this is but an example of a huge amount of unsung work across England.

Now, it wasn't always like that. When I was in parish ministry more than a quarter of a century ago I worked in an ecumenical parish, and got to know our local Catholic parish priest well. I was in my mid 20s, he was in his late sixties, the final years of his priesthood, and one evening as we sipped his rather good malt in the presbytery, he

reminisced about his childhood in the north of England and explained the ostracism, verging on persecution, which his mother had endured simply for being a Catholic. As the evening wore on he admitted that he'd not been across the threshold of a Methodist chapel until he was a mature adult because he'd be brought up to believe that they were heathen places. 'Of course', he said, 'life isn't like that now.'

Packed into that evening's conversation was the complex cultural-historical process which has determined the shape of English Christianity which stem from the processes of the English and continent reformations which stretched across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – the deep grained cultural antipathy to Catholicism, the politico-legal profile of the national church and the splintered nature of English Protestantism, born of the long English reformation and its shadow side, the politics of class. And in the whisky fumes, good king Hal, the shades of Ridley and Latimer, bloody Mary, the fires of Smithfield, the Douai martyrs, the virgin queen, Guy Fawkes, Oliver Cromwell and King Charles's head – to name but a few. To be English is to live with that lot at the mythic level which both makes historians despair and keeps them in business. To be an English Christian is to live with the inheritance of those culture wars which resonate at an almost sub-sonic level, yet still have the ability to subvert even the most carefully constructed ecumenical harmony.

Add to that later developments which gave us the great and godly Mr Wesley and his hymnwriting brother, the godly warrior William Booth, the outpourings of the Spirit in the States and in Alexander Boddy's ministry in Sunderland which shaped modern Pentecostalism and the processes of globalisation which in the last century brought the world church into the mainstream of English church life, and you can see that a gathering as diverse and committed as this one rates as at least one of God's minor miracles.

But that minor miracle didn't just arrive out of the blue. It is a result of the long and patient work of the Spirit. The fact that 'life isn't like that now', as Father Tom put it, is in part a tribute to the success of the ecumenical movement in England. First, on a world scale, the evolution of the World Council of Churches has played a significant role in helping us understand the universality of the gospel, and the ways it both transcends and blends with cultures. The links all our denominations and parishes have with churches across the world remind us that we are part of a growing energetic faith, and we in our turn are learning painfully what it means to be a missionary church in a culture which bears a just a superficial Christian veneer.

Second, we have grown together in England in love and understanding and commitment to each other. We have not completely healing the rifts within Protestantism which were a product of our post-Reformation history, but we have made genuine, tangible progress. One way of measuring that is united congregations, but a more significant one is probably our instinct to do things together at a local level, and the commitment of church leaders to each other in church leaders' meetings. Oh it could better, of course it could. But don't underplay what has been achieved.

Third, the Roman Catholic Church has been an important and significant partner in the ecumenical enterprise for the last 20 years since the Swanwick Declaration of 1987. In his very fine history of the church in the twentieth century, Adrian Hastings

concluded 'A sense of one Christian community with a common mission and a common faith had become central to the experience of all the main churches in England in a way that it had never been previously. And that was a very great achievement.'²

Fourth, the English Christian scene has changed profoundly over the past two decades, particularly but not exclusively in our cities and larger towns. The historic churches have continued to experience what seems on the surface to be decline, but which might on a more rigorous inspection be changing patterns of religious commitment and behaviour. But whilst that has been going on, the world church has arrived. There are now 31 denominations in membership of CTE. Caribbean and African Pentecostalism, various branches of the Orthodox communion which in origin at least are ethnic, are growing and influencing the shape of Christian engagement profoundly. All of that makes ecumenism more complicated, but there is a real sense of delight that they want to be around the table with their fellow Christians.

Fifth, churches have been engaged in theological conversations with each other, with some astonishing results. I do realise that some people regard this part of ecumenical vision as less interesting than watching paint dry, so I'll limit myself to one observation. The ostensible reason for the Reformation was that Martin Luther believed himself justified not by good works but by faith. Justification by faith became the touchstone of the division between Protestantism and Catholicism. In 1999 the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church issued a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification which states theological agreement on the matter and noting that the doctrine should no longer be regarded as church dividing.

Those five realities are part of the remarkable, tangible success story of the ecumenical movement, and it is important that we remember that gift to us, that we recall what God has done. It's not like it was. Once we feared and hated each other. It's no longer like that, thanks be to God.

Oddly, I think we are the victims of that success. Some of the frustration and disappointment that people now feel about ecumenism is that we haven't achieved more. Looking back it is one of ironies of church history that the Nottingham Faith and Order Conference of 1964 which called on the churches to unite by Easter 1980 issued its challenge just two months before Vatican II promulgated *Lumen Gentium* and the Decree on Ecumenism. Had the timing been slightly different a more inclusive form of ecumenism might have been created at a critical point, but it wasn't.

That was a crucial ingredient in the dashing of the hopes of the next generation of ecumenists as first the Anglican-Methodist scheme of 1972 and then the English Covenant failed by small margins. Those failures, which need to be seen in the context of the success of the ecumenical movement, have had a profound influence on church leaders. They are, if you like, a watershed. Those whose memories are long, or who have studied the subject, realise the depth of the achievement. Those who came into the church and its leadership afterwards (which is most now) see only the frustration and pain of those failures.

² Adrian Hastings *A history of English Christianity 1920-1985* (London, Collins 1986) p. 629

We need to remind ourselves that the achievements far outweigh the disappointments. England's unique ecumenical history over the past thirty years has given it a structure which is comprehensive and envied across the ecumenical world. There are nearly 900 Local Ecumenical Partnerships, and new ones keep coming into being. There are thousands of CT groups in towns, villages and cities across the country, serviced and supported by 63 intermediate bodies, composed of regional church leaders, some with a full-time officer, some with a part-time officer, and some with a spare-time officer. And nationally CTE exists to support those intermediate officers and encourage the English churches to work together at every level. That is not to say that it is strong, or that it is perfect – far from it. But it is there, and in many places it punches above its weight, from very slender resources.

Cardinal Kasper has made the point that it is precisely the success of the ecumenical movement which has created what seems like the present watershed in ecumenism. What keeps us divided are the big issues – primacy, episcopacy, the eucharist – and none of those are amenable to the quick fix. The question is, therefore, what we do in the meantime, in the interim period before the unity which God wills for the church comes about in whatever form the Spirit gives.

Let me make a few suggestions.

1. Unity is for mission

It's much easier to do things together than to talk about God together. Deep things don't come naturally to English lips, but we're pretty good at spotting needs and doing something about it. Sure Mary chose the better part, but you'd rather have Martha organising the night shelter. Doing things together – a night shelter, an after school club, a drop-in centre, a youth club, a lunch club – create bonds of friendship and trust, and friendship and trust are the essential to building relationships and ecumenism is crafted from relationships. Sharing together in mission will inevitably help us grow together in Christ.

2. Be open to the gifts God is giving

One of the most important ecumenical developments of recent decades is the realisation that God has coped with the sinfulness of our division across the centuries not by chiding us, but by giving us gifts. God is by nature overwhelmingly generous. Grace overflows, and in our divisions we have been given gifts. Denominationalism has not been a cul-de-sac. Cardinal Kasper has suggested that after a century and more of ecumenical contact the question we need to ask is not 'What gifts does my church have to give?', but 'What gifts could my church receive? How might we be enriched by the gifts that God has given other Christian communities?' That needs to happen at every level of ecumenical encounter.

3. Be open to doing things differently

The title of this Forum is 'Changing world: changing church?' I was once minister of a church that decided it needed to change its hymnbook. The process took diplomatic skills which would not have disgraced Her Majesty's Ambassador to Iran. Change and church are rarely seen in the same sentence.

But we have changed, and we continue to change, hopefully under the guidance of the Spirit. We changed profoundly at Swanwick in 1987 when at Cardinal Hume's prompting the churches declared 'It is our conviction that, as a matter of policy at all levels and in all places, our churches must now move from co-operation to clear commitment to each other, in search of the unity for which Christ prayed and in common evangelism and service of the world.

Three years later CTE was formed to help the churches make that change real in England. Its founder members committed themselves to a united pilgrimage:

'...to seek a deepening of their communion with Christ and with one another in the Church, which is his body; and
To fulfil their mission to proclaim the Gospel by common witness and service in the world,
To the glory of God..'

No longer were Councils of Churches to do things on behalf of the churches. True ecumenism was the churches doing things together. The philosophy of 'Churches Together' is simple. It's what it says on the tin. CTE is a very small agency which exists to help the churches be together and do together.

I want to point to two significant moments in CTE's stewardship over the past three years. Both owe an immense debt to my predecessor Bill Snelson, an outstanding servant of both the ecumenical movement and the English churches. The first was to realise that the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade opened up possibilities to bear witness to the liberating power of the Lord of the brickyard who still longs to set his people free from the bondage of racism and hate. The 'set all free' programme and the remarkable service in Westminster Abbey were truly challenging and reconciling experiences.

The second was to institute a review of the ecumenical journey in England under the leadership of Dr David Spriggs of the Bible Society. We are still working with that legacy as a Board of Trustees, and are launching out on a process of consultation with the churches to discover how in this changing world, and with the experience of changing church, we can help you be 'Churches Together'. The discussions that we will have in this Forum should be understood as a contribution to that conversation, because you are England's Churches Together.

In conclusion, let me return to that amazing controlling story of the Bible, the work of the Lord of the brickyard. Pharaoh's oppressive rule, a cycle of repression and increasing economic demands, is replaced by God's way and God's economy. So, 'we'll cut off the supply of straw but still demand the same number of bricks' is replaced with the ten commandments. They are about relationships – with God, with each other – and built in, some would say as the controlling principle – the Sabbath, the rest at the heart of things.

Ecumenism is in the business of relationships, of space and time for each other within the divine economy, of being able to receive Christ from each other through the gifting of the Spirit, of growing into God together. Get the spirituality and the theology right, and the appropriate structures will follow.

And that is about mission, because the principles of Sabbath and Jubilee lie at the heart of the story of the people of God. Mission is about sharing in the life of God, and relationships with others and the created world. Ecumenism too is about relationships, about cherishing each other, being with each other, receiving Christ from each other. It is about space and time for each other and for God. In that sense it is no optional extra, but part of the reality of what it means to be the church of God. If the churches have the will to make the churches together model work, it could deliver that.