Conference: The World is my neighbour: Bossey and a New Ecumenism

Ecumenical Spirituality

Susan Durber

I've been asked to reflect on ecumenical spirituality – and I take that to mean reflecting on how we might find that unity in Christ which Christi brings in and through our deepest habits and practices of faith. And that's where I am heading, but please bear with me.

In the year 2012, I spent quite a bit of time reflecting on the events of 1662 (350 years before…) – the Great Ejectment. This was a turning point in the history of England, but one that has been largely forgotten. There was a great rupture in English culture as somewhere between 2 and 3 thousand clergy were ejected from the Church of England because they wouldn't 'conform' to the latest Act of Uniformity. Some were parish ministers, quite a few were masters of colleges in Oxford and Cambridge - one was the headmaster of Eton. This was the beginning of a rift in our society that became very deep. It created a nation in which there were two different cultures. Villages and towns were divided between church and chapel. Estate workers went to the parish church and the mill workers went to the chapel built by the mill owner. These different communities had different places of worship, took their leisure in different ways, had different schools, used different tradespeople - and they had very different ways of praying. Even when they did sing the same hymns, they sang them to different tunes and at a different pace or volume. Still now, in some places in England, you will hear different accents in the church and the chapel, drink different refreshments after worship, find a different style of praying and a different preferred political candidate, different ways of being Christian. Such places reveal the kind of difference that was once deeply rooted in our culture. And I think that this also reveals that 'spirituality' is not something so particular, that you can somehow separate it from the rest of life. You can't really understand a person's 'spirituality' unless you know something about the rest of their life, the situation in which they live and work, their social location, their hopes and dreams, their family life and what they do as well as what they pray. Spirituality, if it exists as something separate at all, is a part of the whole of experience. That's why you can't really get a sense of what makes someone's prayer life work and what it means to them unless you really somehow see what it means to be that person in a wider sense.

The worlds of church and chapel, of Anglican and Dissenter, were once very separated. They were created and sustained at first by law and exclusion, and later by education and by culture. The Dissenters couldn't go to the Universities, so they set up their own Academies. They didn't use the liturgy of the Prayer Book, but produced hymns by such as Isaac Watts. They couldn't of course enter the professions, and so they were traders and industrialists, even explorers and entrepreneurs. They learned to pray, not by reading prayers from a book, but by steeping themselves in Scripture and conceiving prayers freighted with the grammar of their mother tongue, the Bible. They learned to build congregations that were pious in particular ways, bound together in a covenant of faith, and based not on geographical area, but on shared commitment. It became a different world from the world of the parish church and for quite some time it was a larger and much more visible world than it is now.

But these different worlds have, largely, broken down, and for all sorts of reasons little to do with anything like official ecumenism. With the abolition of religious 'tests' and the inclusion of Nonconformists in almost every part of national life, this kind of divide has now all but gone. Factory owners, where there are factories, can no longer tell their workers where to worship, and you can find some very grand Nonconformist chapels now very sparsely populated on a Sunday. The children and grandchildren of 'Dissenters' these days feel free to worship at the parish church, or the Vineyard church, or in no church at all. And we have begun to inherit each other's traditions, ways of praying and ways of living the faith, often without realising what we are doing. The old barriers and boundaries are certainly porous, and sometimes it can seem as if they are no longer there at all.

Some years ago there was an article in *Theology* by Will Adam and Graeme Smith called *Hidden Ecumenism*[1], which described how ecumenism is happening in all sorts of practical and unofficial, but nonetheless real ways. The authors argued that Christian unity is being found or being sought through all sorts of ways other than through Faith and Order discussions. Christians of different traditions and denominations now meet together (in a way that they really didn't used to) in the work place, in voluntary work, in service to the community and in campaigning action – and certainly not only in theological dialogues. And, whether we always notice it or not, we are inheriting, exchanging, and to some extent inhabiting, each other's traditions in ways that would have been unthinkable not many decades ago. Anglicans now always sing, 'Our God, our help in ages past' at Remembrance, a fine hymn by the dissenter Isaac Watts. You can now often go into Methodist, Baptist or United Reformed churches and find candles... (even if they are usually tea lights). The liturgical movement of the 20th century means that now we recognise the words we each say at the Eucharist. And many of us sing the hymns of Bernadette Farrell or Stuart Townend, even within the same service.

But I want to tell you about an experience I had recently which revealed how what might be a kind of 'hidden ecumenism' of spirituality is becoming even more evident. I had a wonderful holiday in Pembrokeshire this summer and I joined in the worship, a pilgrimage and some concerts in St David's and particularly at the cathedral. I was privileged to meet some wonderful people and to discover a community which reflects a rich and varied faith.

St David's is a cathedral set in a dip in the landscape, on the Western edge of Wales. It is part of the Church in Wales, but of course the story of St David (Dewi Sant) dates back to a time older than the earliest great rift in the church (and long before the Reformation). In St David's you feel very immediately connected to the church as far away as the 6th century, a church of miracle births and astonishing faith, and thundery storms as fierce as the one that drove us from our rain-battered tent to Matins on a Sunday morning.

As we entered the cathedral, peeling off layers of dripping waterproofs, we were handed a copy of Mission Praise – not what I expect in a cathedral, but more a book written for revival meetings, stronger on songs of personal salvation than of liturgical feasts or the lectionary year. There were banns of marriage read, a sermon preached and traditional Matins punctuated by such songs as Blessed Assurance. We stayed on, gladly given our damp start, for a hot cup of tea, and then for the Eucharist. For this service the hymn book was a more traditional Anglican hymnal and the visiting

[1] '*Theology* Vol CIII No 816 p 412 (2000)

choir from Stockport sang Britten and Bruckner. I noticed, as we waited for worship to begin, that some people genuflected before they entered the pew. And when the hymns began, a man in front was raising his hands in praise. This kind of diversity did not seem strange at all, but wonderfuly welcome. The preacher at this service was the Canon Residentiary, a larger than life character in every sense, a Welshman and a Welsh speaker, but preaching in English. He spoke with a passion that had the fire and poetry of a chapel preacher. He was funny and passionate, deeply biblical and rich in the kind of oratory that makes your spine tingle. At the end of his sermon, the congregation, all of us moved, broke into applause. I can't remember being at a service before where I could so enjoy the richest liturgical language and music alongside the pleasures and challenges of an emotionally stirring sermon. This was a service in which the Word was as sacramental as the sharing of bread and wine, in the sense that the great Congregational theologian P.T.Forsyth argued it could be. The congregation, as far as I could tell, was a mix of local people and visitors, and we were clearly from a range of backgrounds and traditions. Somehow it really felt as though we all belonged.

Later in the week we went to a lunchtime Eucharist. It was August 15th, the feast of the Assumption. The service was not in the nave, but we gathered around the shrine of Saint David near the choir. The shrine has recently been restored and is now decorated with beautiful icons. Prayers are invited and encouraged at a place which honours the ancient saint. And there is a deep sense of connection with pilgrimage to a holy place (we were often told that twice to St David's was equivalent to once to Jerusalem). Leading the service was the Canon Residentiary again, but this time accompanied by a visiting Lutheran pastor from Germany, a woman. During the celebration of the Eucharist there were prayers in Latin, especially for the Feast of the Assumption, and the Latin was spoken in the deep and beautiful tones of the Welsh Canon. There was Welsh spoken too, in welcome and in blessing. We said a creed, and I noticed that a man behind me with a bold, deep voice was very deliberately leaving out the filioque clause. We took communion, and a very young child, with the man who didn't say the filioque, received the bread and wine. After we had all received communion we were invited, if we wished, to come forward for anointing either for ourselves or for someone else for whom we wished to pray. Several moved from their seats and the Canon Residentiary anointed people with such warm tenderness that it was impossible not to be moved. Here was a good priest for sure; appropriately liturgical, warmly pastoral, deeply affirming. This was the same Canon who had said the Latin prayers and led us through a high Eucharist facing East. At the end of the anointing, when the queue was gone, he said in his thundering, yet kindly, voice that he sensed that someone here was holding a great burden and he urged whoever it was to let God take it and hold it. It was an extraordinary moment, with echoes of a piety associated with the charismatic movement or a revival, and so rooted in his pastoral presence that everyone there must have been soul searching. After the final blessing, he repeated the call to allow God to share our burdens and then we were dismissed to the waiting world.

On yet another night, we went to a Songs of Praise in a Congregational chapel in a nearby village. I wanted to experience something of Welsh nonconformity and to sing to God's praise in the tradition that I know in its English form. As we waited in the gallery for the singing to begin, I noticed to my delight that one of the canons from the Cathedral was sitting just along the pew, wearing his cassock, and that he, as much as me, relished the singing and the praying too. He was clearly known and welcome there, as people turned to smile and share jokes. He seemed quite at ease in a place so unlike the cathedral and he sang the hymns with as much gusto as the stalwarts sitting by him.

I tell you all this not to impress you with the depth of my holiday piety, but because I think it illustrates something profound that is happening amongst the people of Christ. We really are beginning to share each other's lives and faith traditions in ways that enrich us all.

But what should I make of such an experience? Was it simply a fine example of 'hidden' or alternative ecumenism, of the people of God simply getting on with it while the official ecumenists dither over definitions and documents?

In many ways this was a very positive and welcome experience of a place in which a great wealth of faith and spirituality was being practised, honoured and celebrated. How refreshing to find that the sacramentality of word was honoured as much as wafer and wine. How beautiful to sense that more ancient ways of pilgrimage and image were being given space amidst the hymns of the revival and the body language of contemporary Christianity. How good to find a priest who really could combine beautifully inhabited and spoken liturgy with passion and pastoral care.

But there are some questions to ask too. Was this really an honouring of all those traditions, or somehow a taking over of them by the one tradition that has most power and most resilience in that place? Were we all being honoured and heard or were we guests in someone else's, albeit very hospitable, house, but not really recognised for what we had brought? Was this truly a deep and rich ecumenism or something like a pastiche?

There was much talk of pilgrimage and miracles around the icons of David at his shrine. But it so easy for pilgrimage to be reduced to a touristic walk around the sites, and for icons to be appreciated only as rather beautiful and exotic seeming pictures, with little sense of the depth of spirituality, meaning and faith behind them. Were the icons more like pictures at an exhibition than the signs of a profound encounter with the divine? Did many people there really understand the world in which pilgrimage might actually be part of the practice of faith and give it structure and meaning? And I wondered whether anyone but a few of us understood why the man behind me might have left out the filioque in the saying of the creed. And what was happening when people came forward for anointing? What layers of meaning were being given to the placing of holy oil on yearning skin?

You might think that none of this matters very much. What matters is that a warm welcome was made for all of us in this ecumenical space; from the possibly Orthodox man behind me to the Lutheran pastor who prayed with us, from those who genuflected to those who lifted hands in praise, from revival hymns to Latin prayers to Mary full of grace. Cathedrals are really especially good at this, and should be places where the whole church can feel at home, and can sense belonging and welcome.

But I wonder whether spirituality and prayer can always be shared in this way, without the danger of such sharing falling into mere bricolage. There *was* something authentic and good about this place, perhaps because much of it seemed to be held together in the body of a person, the Residentiary Canon, who could inhabit all of this with great and evident integrity. There was nothing false at all, it seemed to me, in his moving from Latin prayers to a 'word from God', from medieval liturgy to stirring sermon. But there was also something about this experience that begged to be explained and explored. Perhaps there are on that place, at other times, more opportunities for people to learn what the tradition of pilgrimage is really about or why one might not say the filioque or how Benjamin Britten's sense of what it means to 'rejoice in the Lord' might speak to a charismatic

evangelical. Spirituality is not a thing by itself, but is rooted in practices of life, in habits of action, in social locations and ways of living, without which it is somehow stripped of meaning. A deeper kind of ecumenism, alongside this kind of sharing, is needed, if we are really to receive the gifts we each bring to the table of the one church. Notice the contrast with the situation I described earlier, an English culture which was divided almost completely, where your spirituality was as much if not more a matter of your social class as it was your aesthetic preference, and where ignorance of the other was profound, and suspicion deep. Does that radical split imply, at the very least, that we can't simply expect to add in some Orthodox icons or revival songs to an Anglican liturgy and really understand what's going on.

You can come at this the other way round too. Sometimes in the ecumenical movement we try to take on someone else's practice, but without the spirituality that surrounds and undergirds it. For example, the World Council of Churches has taken on consensus decision making as an alternative to majority voting. This is a way of conducting debates which has its own complex protocols and processes and which can take time to learn. But it has been my experience that such a practice doesn't work so well, or at least it doesn't make the difference it might, if the people acting it out don't inhabit the spirituality that underpins it. It requires a spiritual practice of patience and of listening, that is quite different from the impulse to get a decision made or a resolution through. Quakers know well how to do it, because it fits their values, their ways of relating to one another, their sense of what's important in an encounter. The Uniting Church in Australia has used it for many years and has acquired wisdom about it, a wisdom that's more than about the 'rules', but about a habit of mind. But, when it's used in a community that doesn't share something of the habit that is needed to live with it well, it can become simply another way of wrecking debate, of giving minority voices a veto. I can see that such a method could help the ecumenical movement, but not without understanding it as part of a way of life, a whole way of seeing the world.

Will Adam and Graeme Smith, in their article about 'hidden ecumenism' were arguing that ecumenism is happening in all sorts of ways we don't always notice, and that it doesn't happen well when it's thought to be about Faith and Order alone. It is, I would suggest, no longer dominated by Faith and Order (indeed the pendulum you might say has swung too far…). But I would also argue that ecumenism can never really happen well when it tries to separate out one part of who we are as Christians, whether that's the intellectual, the spiritual or practical – mind, heart or body. I would argue that just as you can't do ecumenism by focussing only on questions of doctrine, so you can't do ecumenism by focussing on spirituality or action alone. If you don't think about what ideas and practices ground our spirituality and prayer, then the sharing of icons, hymns and rituals will become superficial. If you don't think about what habits of practice and experiences of life ground our doctrines then you *will* be reduced to counting angels on pins. Dialogue on Faith and Order alone won't do it – that's true. But neither will a turn away from that towards simply sharing spiritual practices or only joining in shared action. These things have to belong together, if we are to find the unity that Christ wills.

Which brings me to a place like Bossey. There is a place, amongst others, where people can come together for the kind of engagement which, I believe, and it is my experience, can combine body, mind and heart. I was part of a small group working on what became the unity statement for the WCC Assembly in Busan in 2013. We were a small, but very mixed, group. As we met together we spoke about our faith, we prayed together, and we ate together. We talked of ordinary human

things like family and how we had spent the recent days of Christmas. We spoke of politics and the world we share. We shared stories of home and gradually opened up to one another, so that we began to feel secure with one another. It is extraordinary in such gatherings to notice who warms to whom, who exchanges addresses, who goes for a walk with someone else, who listens to whose pain. It is out of these very human encounters that unity comes. There was talk about the kinds of Faith and Order questions that you might expect, and conversation which moved to new ground. There was a sharing of prayer, all in the physical space of committee room chic. Even in the space of a few days, our search for words about unity began to be grounded in something of the realities of all our lives and that was body, mind and heart.

Let me go back to my description of that great rift in England from 1662. Here was a culture in which people lived in separate worlds, tragically almost completely separate. Behind these cultural barricades people learned to sloganize one other, to assume things about one another, and certainly not to learn from one another or to grow together in unity. Now many of those barriers have gone, but this in itself is not enough. We cannot share and receive each other's spirituality or faith or order or practice in an isolated way. We will not understand what we believe about communion unless we engage with not only our doctrines, but our prayer and our practice. But it is also true that we won't understand our spirituality or our practice, unless we engage with questions of faith and doctrine. And the best way to do this has to be through engaging with the wholeness of who we are, as we truly are, mind, body and heart.

Bossey is a place rich in the Faith and Order traditions of the ecumenical movement. People are learning that ecumenism needs to engage our prayer lives too, and our practices in every sense. But it will give much to unity if it also continues to treasure that reflection on faith which can help us understand why we do what we do and why we pray what we pray. The pilgrimage towards unity will need us to do more than admire icons or repeat each other's poetry of praise. It will require us to think about what they really mean for us, to find the meaning in the experience that they might offer to the whole church.

I have been challenged by Adam and Smith's article arguing for an ecumenism that is about more than Faith and Order. But I hope that we will not replace such a path with an ecumenism that is grounded only in 'spirituality' or, more commonly these days, on 'shared action'. Neither of these reductions will do. We need to share, and understand, them all. And that will mean the fullest kind of human encounter; body, mind and heart.