Thanks, Uncle Sidney

"THANKS, UNCLE SIDNEY"

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I think my Uncle Sidney was responsible for the most significant step forward in my ecumenical education. A devoted member of Crwys Road chapel (as it then was), in Cardiff, he liked to remind me of my roots in the Hen Gorff,[1] and in the whole world of Welsh Protestantism; roots which a rather stiffly and self consciously Anglican teenager wasn't always too happy to remember. My family had become Anglicans when I was about eleven - mostly because of a move to a new area where the parish church seemed a lot livelier than the local chapels; and I'd begun to discover not only the heritage of Anglicanism, but, thanks to one or two enthusiastic curates and a well-supplied school library, something about Eastern Orthodoxy (destined to be a lasting enthusiasm) and something about the great monastic and contemplative tradition of the Catholic Church. My loyalties were about as far as could be from the world of Reformed Christianity. Insofar as I thought about the unity of the churches, it was very much in term of the catholic and sacramental traditions as represented in the kind of world I was exploring in my reading, and in studying history and English at school.

Uncle Sidney was an inspired buyer of birthday presents; and just before I started as a student in Cambridge, he presented me with a little book by B. L. Manning called *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts*. It remains one of my favourite books, and I recommend It to anyone who really wants to understand something about genuine Reformed Christianity in its historic depth. Manning was himself a Congregationalist, but one who was steeped in the literature of the early and the mediaeval church, and who also had a passion for the Methodist Hymn Book. And what he made me see was the way in which the Reformed world at its best cleared away a good deal of froth so as to enable you to see the outlines of what needed saying about the nature and action of God. Manning was scathing about two phenomena which he believed were equally destructive of proper Christian loyalty. He loathed the kind of liberalism that rested on vague convictions about how nice people essentially were and how **very** nice God must therefore be; his comments on that ill-fated Anglican production, the 1920's hymnbook *Songs of Praise*, were pretty pungent. And he almost as fiercely loathed the kind of 'Catholic' piety that buried the sharp outlines of the Christian vision of humanity reconciled with God under a pile of fragmentary and sentimental devotions. If you wanted to know what Christians really thought of the work of God, said Manning, you should look either at the early mediaeval monastic hymns or at Wesley; you could forget most of the rest whether it called itself Catholic or Protestant.

Not Good Enough

What Manning made me see was that I needed to be reminded of the existence of what I can only call a **classical centre** to the family of Christian language and practices, and that this had to do not so much with the kind of considerations that had loomed so large for an old-fashioned Anglican, issues about ministry and legitimacy, as with the vision of the nature of God and the scope of Christ's work. Put like that, it sounds simple; what on earth had I been wasting my time with before? But it wasn't at all that I had never been acquainted with this 'classical' vision, or that I'd been fed all through my teenage years with drab High Church legalism. Far from it; what Manning wrote about I recognised. And that was really

the point. I'd been much in love with the 'culture' of historic Catholicism, and I needed to see how that very culture, when divorced from a sharp critical austerity, could get in the way of the classical vision itself. I still remember the shock of reading Manning's severe judgement of Newman's 'Praise to the Holiest in the Height': it was, he said, **almost** a great hymn - almost, because it fails at the last moment to say what the true purpose of the passion is, and contents itself with 'To teach his brethren and inspire /To suffer and to die'. Not good enough, certainly not by the standards of Wesley, who will write variously of, 'the death divine' that secures pardon and empowers us to stand before the eternal throne, our nature changed into Christ's ("Heavenly Adam, Life divine, / Change my nature into Thine!'). Perhaps Manning isn't completely fair; but I could see what he was on about. And the more I read of early Christian theology, of the best of the Russian and Greek traditions and even of what was gradually taking shape in the late sixties as Liberation Theology, the more I could see the urgency of talking of redemption in terms of a transfiguration of what's possible for human beings; and this needed and, I think, needs just as much now, a robust account of how the incarnation opens up the fulness of human dignity.

God's Vision of the World

Because this was really the ecumenical point: what binds Christians, I discovered, was how extravagantly they were prepared to hope for transfiguration in the light of the person and action of Christ, the Word Incarnate. The tussles of classical theology over the trinity and the incarnation appeared not as idle word-spinning, but as attempts to map out what must be true of God, if this is the effect God has on human beings. I realised more and more that it was axiomatic for a good theology that you didn't achieve anything for the good of humanity by underplaying the mystery of God or by sidestepping the challenge of primitive orthodoxy. Incidentally, I remember being encouraged in this by reading an essay of David Jenkins, then a promising, if rather conservative, younger theologian! And when, a little later, as a theological student, I started trying to come to-terms with some of the great Germans of the century, above all Barth and Bonhoeffer, it was the same message I heard. I can remember a summer vacation spent partly in Sweden as an exchange student, when I worked my way through Bethge's great biography of Bonhoeffer, and realised again what practical impact the classical centre could have. Here was a man whose vision was informed precisely by the doctrines celebrated by Athanasius or Wesley, by the conviction of God-with-us in Jesus; when things became serious, he knew where Christians had to stand. And in his openness to both the heart of the Lutheran tradition and to the resources of the monastic life in the Roman and (surprisingly?) the Anglican contexts, he seemed to me to have understood something absolutely central to the real ecumenical enterprise.

Spirituality is now an over-used word, and a word that can suggest a rather 'precious' interest in self-cultivation, isolated from the conflicts of the world. But thinking about it in the context of Bonhoeffer's life and death, it wasn't that. Theology is there to nourish a commitmentto **God's** vision of humanity, a commitment that is bitterly costly when it runs up against other and smaller or more exclusive visions; to bear that cost, you need the disciplines of common life and prayer, the steady diet of a tradition of reading and reflecting that keeps the imagination alert; and - centrally - that discipline, that diet, has to be drawn from more than one corner of the Christian world, because the urgent need for a critical, adult appropriation of what I've boldly called God's vision of the human world is not only by the patient and expectant conversation of very diverse Christian voices. There are things we simply cannot say to ourselves or do for ourselves.

In Spite Of

When I began research (into twentieth century Russian Christianity), it was my supervisor, Donald Allchin,[2] who made me connect all this at last with my specifically Welsh roots. His own discovery of Ann Griffiths,[3] about whom he has written so memorably, as well as of contemporary figures- perhaps Gwenallt[4] above all - had given him a probably unique perspective on the interweavings of unlikely bits of the Christian world. He had been a friend of Thomas Merton another patron saint for me of the kind of ecumenism that matters - Merton, whose journals I'd read as a student, watching with delight as his own discoveries of Bonhoeffer and Barth seemed to echo mine, his own liberation from a sectarian Catholicism showing me something of the way forward. Conversations with Donald were rather like finding my way back to Crwys Road from the other side of the world. I understood what Eliot meant about the 'end of our exploring being to arrive where you started, knowing the place 'for the first time'.

In the years since, I've felt a strong sense of homecoming in a lot of ecumenical contexts where the classical vision manifestly stands at the centre, and the priority is finding the resources that will keep us faithful to the fulness of what God has made possible for us, in prayer and action. For three years, I taught in an ecumenical federation of theological colleges (Anglican, Methodist and URC). The vision was there; but somehow the nature of the institutions didn't always move us towards each other. What I remember as moments of breakthrough are not so much the planned events, let alone the endlessly negotiated and worried-over patterns of worship, but occasional and marginal things - a sermon here, a meal there, celebrating an informal Eucharist at the end of an evening's discussion in the Methodist college's common room, using a rite we'd all worked at together. Put three or four institutions close together, and each will be driven on the defensive at least some of the time. It isn't surprising that the advances come in spite of the public structures rather than because of them, a lot of the time. Homecoming was clearer in things like contacts with Iona and Taize, where there was a tangible common commitment to learning from the wholeness of the Christian past and present, and where the structures are actually designed to nourish this. And, more locally, my first visit to Llanfair Penrhys[5] instantly awakened the sense of being at home - at home with the Catholic Church, witnessing and working and praying out of a depth of shared understanding, reconciling a lot of histories as it worked for practical reconciliation and transfiguration in a very wounded human setting.

Tools for discernment

I have deliberately not talked about ecumenical experience at the level of conferences or negotiations. I don't dispute the necessity of institutional negotiation; in the federation of theological colleges I described, we **had** to do at least some horse-trading for the sake of more important matters. But as we all know, there is a demon of suspicion and defensiveness that takes over quickly and efficiently in so much of the public and corporate life of ecumenical discussion. It simply isn't in these settings that I've learned anything much about the worthwhileness of ecumenism. It has been, as I've tried to say, in this nebulous but all-important area of ecumenical spirituality, to give it a name that is instantly off-putting by its abstractness. I'm driven back all the time to the question of how we feed ourselves and how we are to be prepared for times of serious discernment and decision. One of the Russians I read for my research has a famous parable of the last days, when Christian unity is finally brought about by the advent of Antichrist; and Desmond

Tutu reminded the recent Faith and Order assembly in Spain that no **one** Christian community alone could have resisted and survived in the years of struggle in South Africa. Some of the pressure of ecumenism, I think, comes not just from the needs of mission in general, but from the need to have tools for discernment in crisis; something with which to withstand Antichrist. This means not just a need to understand each other and to be able politely to work and even worship alongside each other, but a need to **understand God together**. We have to have a common vision; and that means (unfashionably perhaps) a common doctrine, a common sense of what kind of God we own and who owns us. This is something that can only come from the serious sharing of worship and of silence - more than sitting amicably alongside each other, but challenging each other to be more faithful to the God of our common vision. The Faith and Order movement has worked hard at producing an ecumenical commentary on the Nicene Creed. It's a fairly dull document, inevitably, but there's something there worth working with. The real commentary on the common classical faith appears in how we pray and **sing** it together, and how we enact what it tells us about human possibility. And that's where we have to develop a much more sharp sense about what's central in all our traditions, and how this or that subsidiary matter of language or practice does or doesn't serve clarity about the classical centre.

I suppose what I'm after is a recognition that ecumenism isn't an exercise in finding a minimum level of agreement, but a way into a **maximal** level of shared discernment and shared wonder at the mystery of God's being and action. Ecumenism based on liberal indifferentism is really neither here nor there; ecumenism based on the discovery of a **passion** in common is everything. When I read Manning on Wesley and Watts, I believe that's what was going on: I'd found a shared passion, something that rebuked the triviality of so much of my own practice and called me to a renewed seriousness and also a greater freedom and joy in faith. The passion of faith has no life without the vivid sense of wonder at the trinitarian God and the opening of the divine life to us by incorporation into Jesus Christ; and where this is truthfully felt, there is a language and a sensibility in common that really does work to keep alive the critical wisdom we need to see past what our current fashions and pressures push at us. I'm thankful that I had the chance to discover something about shared passion through Wesley, Bonhoeffer and Uncle Sidney. If you've known even a little of shared joy and thanksgiving in the face of some profound menace to God's vision of the human, you know why unity matters, and you know where to look for nourishment. It's as true in Penrhys or St. Mellons as in Bonhoeffer's Germany or the old South Africa. Singing together about our access to the eternal throne and the restoration in us of the divine image is the lifeblood of common witness and action. We need above all an ecumenical practice that will help us do just that.

Footnotes:

[1] Hen Gorff: A popular appellation for the Presbyterian Church of Wales, meaning 'The Venerable Body'.

[2] Allchin A.M. cf *Praise Above All: Discovering the Welsh Tradition* (University of Wales Press, 1991)

[3] Griffiths, Ann: 18th century Welsh Poet and passionate Christian. Compared by some to Hildgarde of Bingen in 12th century Germany and Julian of Norwich in 14th century England. S.R. Thomas said of her: "She listened to him. We listen to her".

[4] Jones, D Gwenallt: 20th Welsh poet whose work 'is the product of a creative clash between his idea of man's sinful state and his perception of the ideal order intended by God'.

[5] Penrhys and St Mellons: Local ecumenical Partnerships, with Baptist sponsorship, in areas of deprivation in South Wales.

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