

Kensington URC

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Service at Kensington United Reform Church.

Father Christopher

Isaiah 9:2-7, Ephesians 5:8-14, Matthew 2:1-12

*His black skin bleached in neon light,
his wife, thin as a needle, feeds the child.
Immigrants from Sudan are trouble.
They all have incredible stories,
that make you weep in sorrow,
or in mirth. Deserts breed fantasy.*

*Plastic chairs hold them in position
awaiting the U.K. Border Agency.
Since she has a baby, a woman officer
is also there to comply with laws
that govern justice and drops of mercy.
The baby worries the milk-dry breast.*

*'Why did you leave your country?'
'Why bring your wife and child here?'
Questions worn thin from use.
Three for the price of one, includes
a cradle snatcher. He so old
and she's a teen with an eating disorder.*

*The child snuffles, cries, gets pushed
back upon the nipple. The officer smiles.
The old man speaks in broken words
that fall upon the table: 'An angel spoke me.
To leave. To fly England. Was not here.'
His eyes are moist as if it hovered near.*

*'An angel? In your dreams?
This was a story he had not heard.
They swapped stories and this
was new: black angels.*

*'Do they tell you what to do all the time?'
Perhaps the medics should be called.*

*The ebony man looked lost. He leant
and touched his son, gently, on the head.*

'They die children' he croaked.

*'Are you claiming that your family's in danger?'
A category, at least, that meant something,
somewhere to pass them, a box ticked.*

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This poem is called '*Flight into England*', and I heard the poet, Gavin D'Costa, a Professor of Catholic Theology, reading it in Birmingham a while back. And I read it to you this evening, not because I want to talk particularly about Jesus the refugee, a point now often made, though it remains true, But because it reminded me in a strange way of the cross-purposes at which we can sometimes talk when trying to do the work of ecumenism.

Rather than being lovingly attentive to each other in our difference, we can too easily seek categories to break our difference down into, just as the immigration officer in our poem sought to find a category to place the, possibly Holy, family in. It is all too easy to extract our differences

from the human, and then try to work out solutions much in the same way as we might try to solve a Rubik's cube.

Don't get me wrong, we need robust theological dialogue, whether it be on the nature of authority in the church; the number and nature of the sacraments; or the way in which we read scripture. We will not however solve those differences in these conversations, or at least not any time soon; but can only hope to understand each other better, and, perhaps, to learn something of what is best in the other: we see this I think in Anglican-Roman Catholic relations in the way in which monasticism has become one of Archbishop Justin's priorities; and synodality one of Pope Francis's, both acknowledging what has been learned in conversations between our churches.

Ecumenism must however primarily be about something else: it must be about love. And love can only come about through openness to each other in the first place, and then knowing each other – *really* knowing. Not in the way our immigration officer sought to know that family, for the purposes of putting them in a box, but know in the way in which Jesus sought to know people.

When Jesus speaks to people one-to-one He speaks few words, but we feel the intensity of His gaze in the text don't we? We can somehow tell from His words that all His attention is fixed on the person in total love. And it is that kind of attention towards each other that will lead to the love that Jesus commands us to have for one another: 'People will know that you are my disciples by the love you have for one another.'

We all no doubt know that injunction, and yet we fail, time and again. Why? The only answer must I think be because we focus on our own - our own people and our own achievements or concerns, most of us, except on evenings, once a year, like this.

That is not however God's way. He pitches a tent with the other and lives with them, with us. And God leads us together, if we will let Him; and He leads us together with the authority described in Isaiah: not only does authority rest on the child who has been born to us, but it shall grow continually. But how does He lead us?

Well, I felt the light which St Paul speaks of drawing us out of the darkness in the middle of last year, in *another* baby. A baby called Mariam. The darkness in which we all found ourselves was that of the arrival of hundreds of migrants from Kabul, here in our borough. And this baby Mariam was born a week or so after arriving at Heathrow, while her parents were still in quarantine.

Those of you who were involved will know how chaotic those first weeks here were, and many of us were thrown together at the hotels where the families were staying, not having a clue what to do. I know there were many more who wanted to help too, but who were not able to, given the overwhelming response to the call for help. But in the midst of the chaos, this baby Mariam brought stillness and beauty. She has dark black eyes and eyelashes, and at six days old had a dangerous cough and worried parents. And in her light things seemed to happen. Firstly, together we managed to find medical assistance for her. But more significantly, her arrival among us seemed to galvanise us to pull together and organise our response to what at that point was something of a crisis. And very quickly the different churches involved were meeting every day and we grew to trust each other.

This baby Mariam, and the many others in need, suddenly seemed far more significant than our differences. And Mariam had far more authority over us, in drawing us together, than our differences.

In a similar vein, having arrived in Kensington recently, and having outreach as part of my job description, I set out to learn about the needs of the homeless here. I had volunteered with the Sant'Egidio community in Rome while studying there, on an ecumenical exchange at the English

College; and when I heard that they had worked out of the Carmelite Church here, made contact. They have moved their operations to Farm Street and the West End, but I went for a drink with the appropriately named Carmelo, who told me the names and spots of all the people he had been serving here, with tears in his eyes as he told me their stories. I've since been out with his community in Mayfair, but the light that Carmelo found in the homeless of Kensington has led him to volunteer to help start a new service with us, back here in Kensington.

I could go on with examples. As well as our work, many of us of course live in ecumenical families. My partner is Catholic and we go to Westminster Cathedral on Saturday evenings where he cantors. My grandmother goes to a URC church. Many of the most seemingly anti-ecumenical of my seminarian friends in Rome had close family members of other denominations, and live ecumenically, whether they like it or not. And yet we do not always think of these things as being ecumenical, because we think of ecumenism as meaning a certain kind of institutional progress, or particular projects or events bearing the label 'ecumenical.'

Our duty towards ecumenism will be most fulfilled however when we do what we do not in order to be ecumenical, but simply because we share a common mission and have love in our hearts for one another and for those whom we serve better together, here in the place where we are set.

Over the last year we have worked together of necessity, following the light of those most in need, like Mariam. But my plea to you in this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is not just to pray for unity, but to keep the spirit of our response to the arrival of our Afghan brothers and sisters going, and to continue, both naturally and as a matter of necessity, to work together in serving those most in need in our borough.

This is not a habit most of us have – it feels like ecumenism for some of us in the Church of England to work with other Anglicans. And given the invidious contemporary imperative to *achieve* things in ministry, there can be a certain selfish feeling of ownership over the projects we establish.

Such things are not however of Christ; and only by focussing on Him, whether in the form of a baby in need or a beggar in the High Street, rather than on ourselves and our own agenda, can we have any hope of showing the world the kind of unity in love which is our Christ-given imperative. Amen