



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

The Archbishop delivered the Presidential address to the meeting of the General Synod in York today. The address follows in full

Let me begin with some words from Pope Francis –

“In today's world, the sense of belonging to a single human family is fading, and the dream of working together for justice and peace seems an outdated utopia. What reigns instead is a cool, comfortable and globalised indifference, born of deep disillusionment concealed behind a deceptive illusion: thinking that we are all powerful, while failing to realise that we are all in the same boat... How wonderful would it be, even as we discover faraway planets, to rediscover the needs of the brothers and sisters who orbit around us.”ⁱ

With this in mind, I want to turn to the prayer that Jesus taught his friends, the Lord's Prayer as we call it. Just the opening word is a powerful and challenging declaration of solidarity; a defiant rebuke to all who would reduce us to isolation from each other and from God.

For if this God to whom we pray is 'Father' – and, yes, I know the word 'father' is problematic for those whose experience of earthly fathers has been destructive and abusive, and for all of us who have laboured rather too much from an oppressively, patriarchal grip on life – then those of us who say this prayer together, whether we like it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not, even if we determinedly face away from each other, only turning round in order to put a knife in the back of the person standing behind us, are sisters and brothers, family members, the household of God.

That little word 'our' is a revolution.

Not 'my God.' Not 'your God.' Our God. The God who Jesus shows us is the 'loving Father God'; the God of giving and self-giving reciprocity. The God who is Holy Trinity.

In and through Jesus Christ, this God has taken on our flesh, lived and died, and been raised to glory, so that the barriers of separation that did exist between us, and that still persist if we persist in our wayward selfishness (what the Church calls sin) are broken down.

It is all there in the very first word. God is 'our God.' And therefore, we who say this prayer belong to each other.

This, I concede, most obvious of insights into the prayer we say so regularly, came home powerfully to me earlier this year, when I visited the Anglican Centre in Rome and had an audience with the Pope. It was at the end of that meeting, as Pope Francis invited me to say the Lord's Prayer with him that it dawned on me – yes, I know I'm a slow learner! – that in doing this, saying this prayer together, we were declaring a unity that is already there through our baptism into Christ. Water is indeed thicker than blood.

“The unity of the Church” wrote William Temple, “is a perpetual fact; our task is to not to create it but exhibit it.”

Therefore, what we call the pursuit of Christian unity is actually the making visible of what already exists. It's just that we have become so habituated to our separation, thinking it the normal state of affairs, that we imagine the obstacles to be bigger than they are. We live parallel ecclesial lives. We fail to be scandalised, as I believe God is scandalised. For, again, if we say this prayer, we are, in that one little opening word, declaring the unity that we ought then to bend every sinew and expend all efforts of creativity and ingenuity to make visible.

Why?

For the more effective management of resources?

For a healthier bottom line?

Well, these things would be nice.

But no: in order that the world may believe.

That was Jesus' prayer on the night before he died, and at our peril, do we underestimate the terrible damage our visible disunity does to our proclamation of the gospel.

To the world, it doesn't look like 'our God', but 'my God.'

Entrusted with a ministry of reconciliation, we remain stubbornly unreconciled, appear complacent about division, and often also appear all too ready to divide again.

But that beautiful 'our' runs through the rest of the prayer. Through everything. It is the scandalously beautiful Christian vision from a scandalously hospitable God.

Not my daily bread – but ours.

Not my sins forgiven – but everyone's.

Not my will be done – but God's.

But we have got used to disunity. We think it's normal. When in fact, it is a disgrace, an affront to Christ and all he came to give us.

But if we begin with the word 'our' and let it change the way we see ourselves and see each other, then we will also see that our belonging to each other is not only non-negotiable, it is what we must prize and hold onto in all our discussions, all our decisions, and in all the issues we face.

Moreover, we must always go the extra mile of finding those ways of widening the tent of our inclusion, but without letting anyone be lost.

Disagreeing well really does matter.

As well as an audience with the Pope, on my official visit to Rome, I also met with Cardinal Koch, the Head of the Dicastery for Christian Unity. He got straight to the point and he asked me why I was in Rome talking about unity when the Anglican Communion was splitting?

I told him we were not splitting. That we did face enormous challenges, and that many of them were around the limits and requirements of unity and diversity. I acknowledged that within the Anglican Communion there are movements for change and movements that cherish unchanging practice. But I also said that our way of ecclesial belonging, as a federation of churches in communion, but not under a single rule, allowed us flexibility within the boundaries of our bonds of communion, enabling us to walk together with our conscientiously held differences.

So, this is my conclusion. Ecumenism is something we do, not just something we talk about. It is too important to be left to bishops and theologians. We need a new springtime in ecumenism: new energy; new imagination; new determination. It may even need to begin here in this Synod, in this Church of England.

As we say the Lord's Prayer, let that word 'our' shape us, leading us to a closer collaboration within our churches and deaneries, but also with the other denominations who share our baptism, and with whom we could share ministry and mission and with whom we must pray.

And this more than anything: we need to, we must, search out opportunities for prayer: with each other and for each other and for the unity of the Church that the world may believe.

I've been Archbishop of York for almost three years now, but I still wonder whether the most significant thing I did was in the first five minutes, when I went to the Shrine of St Margaret Clitheroe in the Shambles and prayed in silence with the Roman Catholic Bishop of Middlesbrough.

We said the Lord's Prayer together.

Oh, may this prayer lead us back to each other, for as it leads us closer to the heart of Jesus and his prayer for the world, then it also leads us closer to everyone else who prays it. Suddenly we recognize each other as fellow disciples. We weep for our shortcomings and misunderstandings; ask forgiveness for our many mistakes.

Therefore, let this recognition of our belonging to each other also shape, not just the conversations we have, but the way we have them. We are not talking to strangers, and certainly not opponents, but sisters and brothers to whom we are and should be deeply committed.

These sessions will deal with a number of crucially important matters on governance, the development of LLF, safeguarding. On a number of issues we find ourselves in a challenging place. We will need to critique one another, and we will need to listen to one another. Let us do it as

those who long to demonstrate the self-giving reciprocity of love that we see in Christ, as those who belong to each other. For how we do our business together will affect its outcome.

Referring to political life and the growth of hyperbole and extremism, Pope Francis has written powerfully on how ridicule, suspicion and relentless criticism of each other ends up in a debate that is little more than a ‘craven exchange of charges and counter-charges’ leading to a ‘permanent state of confrontation.’ⁱⁱ

Let us work hard to avoid this: by listening well; by speaking clearly; and recognising the presence of Christ in each other.

Admitting our mistakes, would be a good place to start. For instance, there was a moment in the questions at the last General Synod, when I fear my exuberance for a point I was making came over as dismissive of the question. I am sorry. It was not my intention. I will carry on searching myself, seeking a path of love and grace.

And I dare to ask it of all of us?

Finally, that image of walking together, being in relationship and partnership, even if there is not complete agreement, even if it's impaired, is a deeply synodal image.

During my trip to Rome, I learned more about how Pope Francis and the Roman Catholic Church are opening themselves up to this synodality. Perhaps we, who have had a synod for quite a long time, need to remember its meaning, particularly that of journey and dialogue. Moreover, we have much to learn. Most of all, I suspect, that working through the concerns that enable us to walk together, takes time. And there may need to be some degrees of separation between us, even as we walk. But all this is time well spent. It reveals the beautiful unity of the church, that is the body of Christ, a place where every member is valued.

When I was with Pope Francis he said this: “We must walk together, we must work together, and we must pray together”. In a world of so much division, separation, shallow individualism, and an erosion of community, even an impaired unity among ourselves and a commitment, ecumenically, to keep on talking, praying and walking is very good news indeed. And is so much better than the alternatives!

So, a note for the Liturgical Commission: in all future revisions of our liturgy could we please include the following rubric before each recitation of the Lord’s Prayer: be careful, this prayer is dangerous. It will change you. In saying it, you will lose yourself. You will find the heart of God and God's heart for the world; and you will, to your very great shock and surprise, find those who say it with you are your friends, that you belong to each other.

Watch the livestream of General Synod [here](#)



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