



(Photograph: Westminster Abbey)

Archbishop Justin Welby preached this homily at Westminster Abbey last night during an evensong celebrating 50 years of the Anglican Centre in Rome.

"I... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:1-3)

The Anglican Centre in Rome (ACR) is a needle to provoke mission, a translator to interpret tongues of difference, a channel of friendship to help share hope and strength, a family to celebrate our call as God's children.

Speaking of family, it is wonderful that Princepessa Gesine Doria Pamphilj is able to be present with us this evening – we have been richly blessed by your parents' deep friendship and the great care that your wider family gives our work to this day. Without you the ACR would not be celebrating its 50th birthday.

Fifty is, of course, the new 35 (and 60 the new 40). At 50 nowadays one is barely past the fractiousness of childhood, the excitements of adolescence, the optimism of youth. The Anglican Centre in Rome has reached maturity without complacency: the good looks of established features without the declining energies of old age.

This handsome maturity is, of course, seen not only in its current director [laughter], but in the exuberance of the whole council, and all past directors here today, in fact all of you present.

At 60 I am a sad exception, untouched by the Peter Pan-like pixy dust that emanates from the centre, so generously and wonderfully given.

That all being true, without any element of hyperbole, or attempt to flatter, there is nevertheless a need at 50 to consider what has been and to envisage what should be.

Pope Paul VI, on 23 March 1966, took as his text, "forgetting what is behind, I press on towards the upward call of Jesus Christ."

Of course the apostle did not do anything so simplistically crass as to forget. His epistles are full of what is behind: of sin and deliverance, of past failures set right, and of how God had called and equipped him.

We have to see the statement in its context of the athlete whose only goal is the finishing line, whose only desire is to have used every resource of wit and courage and strength at the moment of crossing that line.□

Because to look back is always to begin to lose. The look at the opponent alongside or behind unsteadies the pace, and admits the possibility of failure. In Paul's terms, to press on is not to ignore the past, but to resist its chains and weights and so – in today's New Testament reading – to

lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

Every weekday morning at Lambeth Palace we pray this prayer, from the Catholic Chemin Neuf Community who live with us and have so transformed much of our experience:

"Lord Jesus,

Who prayed that we might all be one,

We pray to you for the unity of Christians,

According to your will,

According to your means.

May your Spirit enable us

To experience the suffering caused by division,

To see our sin,

And to hope beyond all hope,"

It is a prayer that recognises the past and present, our sin – and yet comes back to God, who calls us to be one, because to be one is the only way to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called.

The difficulty which the prayer faces full on is that the habits of the centuries render us comfortable with disunity – even more so when there is the apparatus of dialogue. Dialogue can be an opiate, dulling the pain of separation; or it can be a stimulant, confronting us with the need for repentance and change.

Let me make, in the very brief period of an evensong homily, comments about three aspects only of the relationship between us. One about ARCIC, one about IARCUM and one about the ACR.

Let me say about all three that I pray for disruption. I pray that ARCIC disrupts our disunity, makes waves, makes pain. ARCIC has been running a marathon in three phases; perhaps a triathlon might be a better word. Its labour have been remarkably constant, as have its labourers, and its efforts are too often unseen but essential.

In order for it keep finding disruptors of division, of disunity and of schism, it must develop its especial genius of a spirit of receptive ecumenism:

of asking not what we might give the other, but what we lack that God might give us through the other.

With that must come a willingness by the church to listen to ARCIC. Its reflection on the subjects covered, whether of sacraments, of the universal primacy of the Holy Father, of ecclesiology and so on, ARCIC anchors the church in theological discussion. It prevents us from interpreting God in the light of the spirit or fashion of the age, and calls us to interpret the spirit of the age in the light of the face of Christ. It is a work lived in patience.

IARCUM disrupts by its relationships. Its image of two doves finding refreshment on journeys from different places speaks of the weariness that the church causes itself to feel. Not only do we suffer the bitterness of the world's suffering, but we heap suffering on ourselves with our unconscionable rigidity, hypocrisy, introspection and self-deception.

Our introspection hardens our hearts and increases our sin.

Last week (9th June) at the Mass at the Santa Marta the Holy Father spoke in this context of overmuch rigidity that, in a wonderful phrase so typical of him, said needs "reconciling amongst ourselves is the tiny sanctity of negotiation."

But to reconcile is always to be deeply disrupted.

IARCUM confronts us with a world that does not ask if we are Anglican or Catholic, but whether we are Christian. The woman raped in the DRC seeks help from those who will love her because she bears the image and suffering of Christ. The man on a mattress on the Embankment looks up seeking help not from an Anglican, but the face and hand of Christ for him, and of course his dog.

To be together in mission is to become part of the bearers of life. It does not negate, relativise or diminish our profound differences: on the contrary it demonstrates their significance. But to be together in mission disrupts our sense that they are tolerable; it rubs them into the wounds of our divisions like salt. Let us welcome disruption.

Which brings me to the Anglican Centre in Rome. I was speaking to someone outside the church recently, and they said, "ARC, that's your spy station isn't it?"

Is it indeed our Fylingdales, the cold war era radar in Yorkshire that ran part of the Distant Early Warning System?

Should Sir David Moxon simply be M, writing like the real C of MI6 only in green ink, and conveying information to Lambeth through dead letter boxes? Perhaps though he has been turned?

It's a tempting metaphor, but I shall desist for the moment. ACR is neither embassy nor spy station. It is the living presence that enables love –

that in some sense cannot be fully consummated at present – to be expressed through those from here who go there, and with those in Rome who meet its director and know that we love them, which we do, as individuals and together.

Like the ring given by Pope Paul VI to Archbishop Michael Ramsey, the ACR is worth much but stands for infinitely more. It is essential to our relationship, to knowing the pain of division, to being humble and patient in bearing with one another in love.

Above all it carries the disruption of love, that brings in place of the comfortable complacency of long accustomed distance the ecstasies and agonies of passion and the presence of the Holy Spirit. In its neighbours like Caravita, it finds a reciprocity of affection, which provokes and disrupts disunity.

May God be praised for His mighty work over us and through us, despite our disobedience and division. May we find afresh both pain and hope, and may the ACR minister to us both.

7 min read

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