

The John Coventry Memorial Address given by Archbishop Rowan Williams at a meeting of Interchurch Families at the Church of the Immaculate Conception, Farm St, London W1, on 20 March 2010.

The Fellowship of the Baptized

I'm particularly pleased to be able to respond to this invitation since Fr John Coventry was a very much loved and valued colleague in Cambridge many years ago. His presence at seminars and discussions in the context of the Faculty of Theology, his learning, his sense, his wit and humour, the breadth and generosity of his perspective left me (should I have needed it, which of course I didn't) with a very generous picture of the Society of Jesus, and what it could do for the whole of the Body of Christ. And I thank God for my friendship with him those many years ago which continued after we'd both gone elsewhere.

'The fellowship of the baptized' is a subject that prompts us straight away to ask some basic questions both about how we are defining baptism, and about the identity of a baptized person. I'll begin by proposing a very short answer to such questions: the baptized identity is *being where Jesus is*. We speak in theological language of entering 'into Christ', so the bottom line when we're reflecting on the definition of baptism is surely to say that it places us in the place of Jesus. The New Testament already makes it clear that one of the most important ways in which this is expressed is through the fact that we pray the prayer of Jesus as we stand in the place of Jesus. That is, in the Holy Spirit we say, 'Abba, Father'.

But where Jesus is, is in itself quite a many-layered notion. Jesus is in the neighbourhood of God the Father and so when we stand where Jesus is we too are in that neighbourhood and we learn his language of his relation to God the Father. But the incarnate Jesus is also in the neighbourhood of the chaos and the suffering of the world – a world he has entered to transform. It's a dimension of baptism vividly captured in the visual and verbal imagery of the Orthodox Church which sees the descent of Jesus into the baptismal water of Jordan as a descent into the chaos, into the unformed reality which swills around just below the surface of the ordinary world. To speak in those terms is really to paraphrase the epigram which I think originates with the great Irish Benedictine, Columba Marmion. He spoke about Christ being simultaneously *in sinu patris* and *in sinu peccatoris*: in the bosom of the Father and in the bosom of the sinner. Christ is simultaneously in the neighbourhood of the Father and in the neighbourhood of the sin, the formlessness, the shapelessness and dissolution, the dis-integrity of creation. He is in the heart of both realities, simultaneously. And that, of course, suggests that when we as baptized persons come to be in the neighbourhood of Jesus, that some dual proximity is what we have to get used to. We are in the neighbourhood of God the Father indeed, and pray the prayer that the Spirit enables: Abba, Father. But we are also in proximity to the world into which Jesus descended; in proximity to the chaos and the formlessness of fallen creation.

And it is of course that two-sided dimension of baptism that stops the baptismal identity simply being static or exclusive, religious in all the worst possible senses. It means that we can only be confident of our proximity to God the Father in Jesus if we're *also* alert and awake to the proximity of chaos. Our baptismal solidarity with Jesus Christ means that we are in solidarity with all the fellow Christians we never *chose* to be in fellowship with (always one of the most difficult bits of Christian identity) but it also means that we're in solidarity with an unlimited variety of human experience that relates to the darkness and the chaos into which Jesus descends in his incarnation. We are in the neighbourhood of a darkness inside and outside the Church, inside and outside our own hearts. *In sinu peccatoris*: in the bosom—the heart of—what sin means.

So the identity of the baptized is not first and foremost a matter of some exclusive relationship to God that keeps us safe, as opposed to the rest of the vulnerable and unlucky world. It is at one and the same time living both in the neighbourhood of the Father and in the neighbourhood of darkness. That is why we speak of being baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ, not simply baptized as a mark of our affinity or alignment with Jesus in a general way, not baptized as an external sign that we more or less agree with what Jesus says. Our baptism is a stepping-into Jesus' place with all that that entails. And it means that Christian baptismal identity is—again at

one and the same time—both a depth of human experience that brings us into at least the potential of intense, transfiguring love, the Trinitarian love in which Jesus himself lives, and a level of expectation, humility, penitence and hope. The experience of the baptized is not the experience of endings, but of repeated new beginnings. We don't simply acquire relationship with God the Father which then requires us to do nothing more. On the contrary, to be baptized is to be constantly re-awakening our expectation, our penitence, our protest, our awareness that the chaos and darkness of the world is not what God wills; our awareness that we are colluding with that state of chaos which God does not will. So as baptized persons we look constantly into ourselves, rediscovering over and over again the hope that comes out of true repentance.

That, I suggest, is somewhere near the heart of what the identity of the baptized is. And lest you should think that's just a twenty-first-century perspective, I refer you to (among many other texts) what St Augustine had to say about baptism in some of his great treatises and letters on the subject. St Augustine, confronted with people who *seemed* to be inclined to regard baptism as a badge of having 'arrived', would refer back to the fact that baptized people say the Lord's Prayer. That is in fact one of the *most* distinctive things that baptized people do, because they call God 'Father'. And in that baptismal prayer that Jesus gave us we say, 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us'. Why do we bother to say that (says Augustine) if baptism is simply the badge of having arrived? When we meet a Christian who is inclined to treat baptism in *that* way, just remind them of the Lord's Prayer. In slightly different terms you can say baptism is the beginning of a 'baptismal narrative', a story of discovering and rediscovering through failure and restoration, just what it is to live in the place where Jesus lives.

If that is central to what baptism means, what are the implications for speaking of the 'fellowship of the baptized' both in the rather technical sense which we call the Church, and in the rather more personal dimension of what it means to be daily in communion, in fellowship with baptized people? I want to try and explore this a little further.

Obviously we're faced with one of those paradoxes that haunts Christian theology so much. The Church is unified in baptism. After all, to be in the place of Christ together is to be in one place – 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all', says the apostle. Surely, being in Christ through baptism guarantees that Christians are and know themselves to be *in one place*, unified.

And yet it doesn't always look like that. To be in the place of Christ—if it involves, as I've suggested, being truly vulnerable to the chaos and darkness of the world—also means that Christians are people who live dangerously because they live in proximity to darkness and to sin, because they are naked and exposed to a great deal of what that means. Then the strange and rather difficult thing is that Christians may find they are not less but *more* vulnerable at times to fragmentation, conflict and division, just because they are where they are, and haven't yet rooted themselves firmly enough in Jesus' relation to the Father. They divide and divide again, and divide again and again. The baptismal body is unified because it is where Christ is and it's also a body not only wounded but constantly wounding itself because of that dangerous proximity to the chaos Jesus comes to transfigure. A baptismal fellowship is not a fellowship of the sinless. It took the early Church a while to realize this. The high hopes and extravagant aspirations of the first Christian centuries really centred on the notion that once the baptismal relationship was in place, it would be impossible to betray it. But reality kept breaking in, and the Church had to go through a painful re-examination of what it meant by standing in the place of Christ, and to find ways of understanding that the baptismal identity is a narrative of discovery and re-discovery of the place occupied always being fragmented, drawn away by the proximity of darkness. The baptismal body, the Body of Christ, is a wounded body and those wounds are so often self-inflicted. So the fellowship of the baptized is not only a fellowship of wounded *persons* on journeys of discovery, it is itself a wounded and divided fellowship, pulled apart in all kinds of ways.

And if we simply left it there we would still not have said enough. Because this is not only a self-wounded body, it is also a self-*healing* body. The Body of Christ is repeatedly scarred by our betrayals, our urge to run away from God and from each other, but because it is the Body of *Christ* it constantly renews itself, enables re-discovery; its wounds are always in process of being healed. Its fragmentation is always in process of being

overtaken by that basic Trinitarian reality that's at work within it by the Holy Spirit, because it's a body in which the reality of the unbreakable covenant between God and the world is coming alive day after day. What heals the wounds in the Body of Christ is the stubborn, unchanging reality of the Lord, Jesus Christ, who has promised to be there, who has promised that he will not desert, not abandon his body. So the unconditional covenant he has made to be with us—Emmanuel, 'God with us'—heals and restores his Body time and again. Which is why the practice of the Eucharist is at the heart of the Church because in the Eucharist, in the total self-giving of Christ to his people embodied in the sharing of his body and blood, the unconditional covenant is affirmed. When we come to Holy Communion we rediscover not just a story about Jesus that happened a long time ago, we rediscover the unchanging reality of what some theological traditions call 'the covenant of grace as renewed in the Eucharist'.

So the fellowship of the baptized is both a broken fellowship and a fellowship repeatedly being renewed by and through the covenant of grace in eucharistic fellowship. And that of course is where some of the hardest and most painful issues arise for a group like this [Inter-Church Families]. But not exclusively for a group like this. For all kinds of reasons (good, bad and theological) we find ourselves distanced from one another. We are wounded by the words and the traditions that have brought life to some and, it seems, death to others. The wounds of the body are not superficial. They run right to that depth where we find ourselves, it seems, unable to receive together the pledges of the covenant of grace, the holy gifts of the Eucharist.

What do we do then? The fact is that when such conditions arise, as they have arisen again and again in the Church, and as they have arisen in the Western Church especially in the last half-millennium, it seems that God in his mercy continues to raise up other sorts of pledges of his covenant. And it's in this context perhaps that the reality of inter-confessional marriage in a divided Church acquires its deepest theological significance. Here are people from different parts of the body, unable by the law and custom of their communities to share the Eucharist together, nonetheless living out another sacramental reality, a sacramental reality that is in its essence about covenant and unconditionality. Here is a sign raised up by God, often against all probability and very often against all custom and encouragement, that allows us to speak even in a wounded and divided Church, of some shared witness, some shared exposure to the unconditional covenant of grace, because that is what the sacrament of marriage is about.

The married couple pledge themselves to be Christ to one another. That, surely, is at the heart of the sacramental theology of matrimony. They pledge themselves to be to one another a sign of unconditional, covenanted love, a place where prayer becomes possible as love deepens. And in pledging to be a sign to one another in that way, they pledge themselves likewise to be a sign *in the whole Church* of the covenant of grace. They pledge themselves, in other words, to something remotely but truly analogous to the Eucharist to be a finite, physical, tangible embodiment of covenanted love.

That happens in and beyond all the experience of failure, frustration and division that we find in the divided Church. But it means that in this particular context, inter-confessional marriage has about it, an *eschatological* character. It is something that pushes us to the perspective of the *end* of things, to what it *ought* to be like, to what it needs to be, where it's all going. That, in a divided Church, becomes, like all sacramental signs, something transformative. And I would hope and pray that the experience represented in this particular fellowship, a fellowship of baptized Christians marrying across confessional boundaries, itself a 'sign of the end', becomes more and more powerful and transformative as time goes on. The inter-church family is a mark of the self-healing body over against the self-wounded body on earth.

And of course when we've said that, it's possible also to think of other kinds of inter-church family. Not so obviously sacramental in the strictest sense, not so obviously committed and lifelong, but I'm thinking here of those inter-church families represented by the L'Arche communities, the World Community of Christian Meditation, and quite a number of other networks of that kind. These are the fruits of an extraordinary half-century or so in which the Holy Spirit has been creating fellowship among the baptized in very unexpected ways, bringing some very unexpected people into each other's neighbourhood. And I mention particularly the L'Arche communities because it seems to me particularly that in the vision of Jean Vanier we see once again that

Christian identity draws you into the *neighbourhood* of people who you might not otherwise be able to stand with, transforming you in the process. The baptized identity is, therefore, always something both risky and difficult. And it renews itself *through being where Christ is*.

Providence is notoriously resourceful. I think it was C. S. Lewis who once said that providence was ‘positively unscrupulous’. In a culture and an age where the self-inflicted wounds of the Christian body sometimes seem to be getting deeper rather than otherwise, God persists in raising up such healing relationships. And this is not simply a matter of creating an environment in which individuals get on better together. It is something to do with raising up *transforming* signs, and making available in the life of the Church the covenant of grace *renewed*.

So my reason for choosing as a title for my remarks ‘the Fellowship of the Baptized’ was fundamentally a conviction of exploring the reality of the inter-church family. Something about baptism comes to light, something about the baptized identity comes more closely into focus, by thinking through what it would be to live a wholly committed and mutually generous life across the historic divisions of Christendom. That opens the door to seeing how the body *heals* itself. I believe very passionately that in the life of all the churches one of our most central and important and difficult tasks is not to produce an endless series of solutions to our Christian divisions and difficulties, but to press on under the guidance of the Spirit to a condition where we are free enough to receive the work of the Spirit and allow the Body of Christ on earth to heal itself.

Our historic divisions, and the divisions we continue to multiply these days (and yes, I am thinking of the Anglican Communion among other bodies), frequently arise from the desire to solve what seems to be an unbearable tension of disagreement and diversity of perspective. And because it’s very understandable that we buckle under the weight of such pressure, we can get to a point where we are less free to experience and receive the self-healing and self-restoring power that is in the Body of Christ. Discovering that is a lifetime’s work, not a five-year plan. But if we mean what we say about our baptismal identity – about what is entailed in being where Jesus Christ is – sooner or later we have to come to terms with the fact that his body can heal itself.

So I’m asking you to celebrate with me God’s capacity to raise up in a self-wounded Church signs of a self-healing Church; to celebrate with me the way in which inter-Church families become in that sense a sacrament of the final purposes of God; to look through that prism at all sorts of other inter-confessional, family experiences and see them as reflecting in a small way the dogged persistence of the Lord in manifesting marks of healing in his Body. But perhaps above all we are being drawn back to that essential ‘double-ness’ in our baptismal life: *in sinu patris, in sinu peccatoris*. To be a baptized person is to be identified with the one person, divine and human, in whom those things can fully and perfectly co-exist; to be identified with Jesus who in the depths of hellish human experience, remains united to his Father. We cannot create that fusion of extremes for ourselves, but that’s the world into which we step when we step into the baptismal waters. And it’s a reminder that when we step into the baptismal waters (however exactly we understand that), we do it not for the sake of creating a religious experience that can be *ours* and not *theirs* or *yours*, we do it for the sake of the whole world whose chaos and darkness and brokenness cannot finally be healed or resolved except by *being where Christ is*, by being brought again and again, in prayer and love and service, into the place of Jesus.