

South Australian Council of Churches Inc



Annual Ecumenical Lecture

Receptive Ecumenism: Encounter with Beauty, Truth and Love

Presented by Geraldine Hawkes, Executive Officer, SA Council of Churches

20 June 2013, 7.30pm – 9pm
Adelaide College of Divinity, 34 Lipsett Tce, Brooklyn Park

FOCUS & OUTLINE OF LECTURE

Over recent years we have heard extensively from Rev Dr Denis Edwards, Mr Geoff Moore and Dr Paul Murray – the main proponent of Receptive Ecumenism – about the emergence and the theological underpinnings of Receptive Ecumenism. We have also explored and described possible applications of Receptive Ecumenism.

In this lecture, through art, reflections and practical examples, I wish to illuminate aspects of **Receptive Ecumenism** in ways that may encourage us all into a new disposition and relationship towards one another and God, and invite us into a deeper awareness, experience and engagement with God's Beauty, Truth and Love in one another and in our world.

The key focus for Receptive Ecumenism is what do we need to learn about being Christ-like from one another, rather than what do we have to tell the other – or even, how can the other become more like us!

Receptive Ecumenism requires a disposition of love and humility. It requires us to know – and accept – that we are each different, that we each have our own gift, our own charism – and that we are beautiful and loved.

Receptive Ecumenism also invites us **to receive the beauty and the truth of one's own church and of the church of the other, in love.**

If we believe that God gazes lovingly on every one of us, how can our Church, both as institution and as people, be further drawn into gazing upon one another and all of creation with that same look of love? What might we discover...how might we respond? How might we become more fully the people, the church, the life that Christ prays that we be?

*"...that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, **so that the world may believe that you have sent me**". John 17:21*

Words, Phrases and Images to Inspire and Encourage

When Paul Murray spent time with us last year, he left us with a key insight for the next stage of the journey towards unity in Christ: the potential of Receptive Ecumenism for **Institutional Flourishing** through **Ecclesial Conversion**.

- ❖ **Institutional Flourishing** - Receptive Ecumenism offers an approach that includes the potential for change, ***including and especially***, across the structures and the practices **at all levels** of the various traditions – and even the way we serve the world - “...*that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me*”. *John 17:21*
- ❖ **Ecclesial Conversion** - Receptive ecumenism is as much about self-examination and inner conversion than convincing the other; Anglicans and Roman Catholics can help each other grow in faith, life and witness to Christ if they are open to being transformed by God’s grace mediated through each other.” *ARCIC III Media Release May 2011*

In this regard, the following Gospel passage comes to mind...

“The lamp of the body is the eye. If your eye is sound, your whole body will be filled with light. But if your eye is diseased, your whole body will be filled with darkness.” *Matthew 6:22-23*

Key words and phrases

Paul also left us with some key words and phrases and since July last year I have heard these echoing through many of you in prayers, in conversations and in meetings:

- ❖ Leaning into the Spirit - agent of the ecumenical journey
- ❖ Start with part of the garden we’re responsible for...
- ❖ Run at the horizon and the horizon expands
- ❖ A Movement, a virtuous virus...
- ❖ A journey of continuing growth on each side
- ❖ Promise-filled invitation...hope-filled imagination...
- ❖ Healing gifts for wounded hands...
- ❖ Surprised by joy – expectant, penitent joy, realising we are on holy ground fed by the presence of Christ

Images

Alongside these phrases, I’ve selected two visual images to illustrate different experiences of ecumenism – ecumenism as we have known it (and will continue to know it in some ways) and ecumenism in the way of Receptive Ecumenism.

Both depict the encounter between Jesus and the Woman of Samaria at the Well. One is a painting and one is a sculpture. I invite you, as you look, to notice on the way in which the encounter is depicted by the two artists, rather than on the story itself.

Photo 1 <http://www.sacc.asn.au/ data/Painting for Annual lecture 2013.jpg> is a painting, hanging in a Church at Taybeh, a Palestinian Village - on the boundary between Samaria and Judea.

Without looking too closely or analysing at this stage, let your eye rest gently on the painting, and ponder on which, if any, of the following words, which Paul Murray shared with us, are manifest in this work:

- ❖ Leaning into the Spirit - agent of the ecumenical journey
- ❖ Start with part of the garden we're responsible for...
- ❖ Run at the horizon and the horizon expands
- ❖ A Movement, a virtuous virus...
- ❖ A journey of continuing growth on each side
- ❖ Promise-filled invitation...hope-filled imagination...
- ❖ Healing gifts for wounded hands...
- ❖ Surprised by joy – expectant, penitent joy, realising we are on holy ground fed by the presence of Christ

Photo 2 <http://www.flickr.com/photos/7383661@N08/7381480478/in/photostream/> is a sculptural water feature, commissioned by Chester Cathedral and sculpted by Stephen Broadbent <http://sbal.co.uk/what we do/projects/water of life/> It is located in the Cloister area of Chester Cathedral, UK and is entitled *Water of Life*.

Again, without analysing the work, in what ways do we experience those words and phrases from Paul Murray in this depiction:

- ❖ Leaning into the Spirit - agent of the ecumenical journey
- ❖ Start with part of the garden we're responsible for...
- ❖ Run at the horizon and the horizon expands
- ❖ A Movement, a virtuous virus...
- ❖ A journey of continuing growth on each side
- ❖ Promise-filled invitation...hope-filled imagination...
- ❖ Healing gifts for wounded hands...
- ❖ Surprised by joy – expectant, penitent joy, realising we are on holy ground fed by the presence of Christ

I think we would agree that the second image, the sculpture, rather than the first, conveys more deeply both the energy and the serenity evoked by the wonderful expressions Paul shared with us, words which embrace the spirit of Receptive Ecumenism.

Ecumenism for Today and Tomorrow...

Let's go back again to those two art works and examine them more deeply as we explore what else they offer us in regard to Ecumenism...

Photo 1 <http://www.sacc.asn.au/ data/Painting for Annual lecture 2013.jpg>

When I look at this painting, I see various aspects which, I would suggest, at least in my experience, illustrate ecumenism as we have known it – and in some ways will continue to practise it:

- ❖ Two figures, the woman and Christ > the different churches
- ❖ The figures are gathered around the well which is in the middle of the picture, giving the well prominence > the well – symbolising an issue which is receiving greater attention than the figures or the relationship. Consider ecumenism as we have experienced it, which evolves, reasonably enough, from an issue eg matter of doctrine or a social justice matter, rather than focusing on the relationship with all that it entails. Through engagement with the ‘issue’ we tell one another about ourselves and our church, or about how we can act together, from our vantage point of the Gospel...while remaining open to some learning, usually at the more individual level.
- ❖ Eyes - looking at one another - even if a little indirectly – or even shyly > how willing are they to gaze deeply and lovingly on the other, to be fully present to one another ...or are they preoccupied with other matters that reside elsewhere?
- ❖ The figures are half turned towards each other > does this signify that they are only half committed?
- ❖ Feet are pointing outwards and away from each other > ready to depart and go back to where each came from? Not ready, not able, not willing to take a step closer towards one another, to stand alongside one another on the same ground?
- ❖ Painting: in a frame – contained, hanging on a wall – can’t walk around it or behind it. Two dimensional...
- ❖ Viewed generally by those who come into the church...how does it connect with daily life, with the world?

Photo 2 <http://www.flickr.com/photos/7383661@N08/7381480478/in/photostream/>

When I look at this sculpture, I see some aspects which illustrate elements of Receptive Ecumenism. First, let’s look more deeply at the image and what is depicted there:

- ❖ Two figures – Christ and the Woman
- ❖ Figures are linked, physically and spiritually – through the circular shape and through the same medium of bronze
- ❖ Both are holding the bowl...not separately but hands around the hands of the other, being held by the other, gently yet firmly, safely...
- ❖ The whole sculpture looks like it could move at any time and roll over – and away...together, evoking a feeling of vulnerability – yet the figures remain totally trusting.
- ❖ There is a sense of them rising from and yet returning to the same source
- ❖ The woman is going nowhere without Christ – Christ is going nowhere without the woman

- ❖ The bowl is running over with water, with life, returning to the source and being gathered up again, overflowing again
- ❖ Face to face
- ❖ Really close
- ❖ Intense yet tender
- ❖ The eyes...fixed on one another...
- ❖ A sculptural water feature, surrounded by a garden - you and I can walk around it, can touch it, can enter the space between the two figures and be part of their life
- ❖ Open air for all to see...
- ❖ Depicts reciprocity, relationship
- ❖ Who is giving to whom? Who is receiving from whom?
- ❖ Spaciousness, movement
- ❖ Beauty – Truth – Love...

1. Receptive Ecumenism - an encounter with Beauty

Photo 2 <http://www.flickr.com/photos/7383661@N08/7381480478/in/photostream/>

I invite us to keep in mind the insight from Paul Murray about the potential for Receptive Ecumenism to bring about **Institutional Flourishing** through **Ecclesial Conversion**. So, as we look more deeply at the sculpture, we can let what it evokes within us arise and speak to us in relation to our own church as an institution.

Receptive Ecumenism invites us to encounter the Beauty in the other as well as in ourselves through:

- ❖ Letting go of focusing on, naming and reacting to the structural ugliness, or sin, in the other
- ❖ Being open to change that which is ugly or sinful within our own tradition
- ❖ Being willing to enter into the space of the other – to learn from the other
- ❖ Letting go of our eyes being preoccupied with self, to eyes open/awake and amazed at the beauty within and around us.
- ❖ Recognising the beauty of Christ in the other – as well as the as-yet unfulfilled, unacknowledged beauty in self.

“The faith of the other is a gift of God, even if I don’t really understand that gift and it remains a mystery to me. This gift given to the other is also in a certain way a gift given to me.” *Christian de Chergé, prior of Our Lady of Atlas Monastery in Tibherine, Algeria*

Some of the elements of Beauty in Receptive Ecumenism emerge in this sculpture, especially through its shape and space:

- ❖ its three-dimensional nature – you can move around the sculpture and see it from all facets and angles, not just the flat/two dimensional or the immediate...
- ❖ its circular shape with the invitational space in the middle together with its seeming heart-shape with all that references to *heart* evokes
- ❖ the figures joined to one another, facing one another, close to each other – yet with space between and for one another - space for more - and more

Questions for pondering...

To what extent do we yearn to discover the beauty in the other...are we willing to notice beauty in unexpected places...to stand close to the other, yet leave space for the other ... or do we have a tendency to take over the space of the other, desire that the other be like us or conform to our idea of beauty?

Way forward

Receiving the Gift of the other exercise – see Healing Gifts for Wounded Hands page 6 http://www.sacc.asn.au/ data/Receptive_Ecumenism_Booklet.pdf

When we did this exercise at SA Council of Churches General Council meeting in March 2010, various areas were named and people remarked that there was a deep sense of the Spirit among the gathering; they commented on the time as being one of “gift of grace”, of having “experienced the community that is at the heart of the Trinity”, “challenged to stand up to the new atheism”, “new humanity in Christ”, “new vision and direction”, “affirmation and hope”.

2. Receptive Ecumenism - an encounter with Truth

Photo 2 <http://www.flickr.com/photos/7383661@N08/7381480478/in/photostream/>

Sarah Bachelard, in 'Experiencing God in a Time of Crisis' writes: "Central to encounter with God ...is the process of stripping away of illusions, of the false self and process of allowing a truer, more authentic self to emerge. This is a process that the New Testament speaks of, using metaphors of 'dying to self', 'leaving self behind' and 'losing one's life to find it'."

Our tendency has been to apply that 'dying to self', 'leaving self behind' and 'losing one's life to find it' to the individual journey in faith. It is fair to say that it applies equally to the institutional or the ecclesial journey in faith, at whatever level, perhaps even more so given the face that the institution presents to the world and the capacity of the institution to be prophetic, to manifest and to facilitate justice and peace across all people.

Receptive Ecumenism invites us to reflect especially on the authenticity, the core truths, in our ecclesial structures, systems, processes and practices which we with others have created in our Boards, our Committees, our Councils, our Synods, our Agencies and which have evolved and been re-shaped over time.

Receptive Ecumenism invites us to consider to what extent do they:

- ❖ Manifest organisational 'dying to self', 'leaving self behind', 'losing one's life to find it'
- ❖ Oppress, limit or exclude our core truths, the core truth of our own tradition?
- ❖ Obscure, diminish, extinguish the light of Christ?
- ❖ Liberate us to be authentic and to be drawn closer to Christ, closer to one another?

Let us then look at the the figures in the sculpture which are:

- ❖ Emerging from the waters - of baptism - the water of life > immersed in Christ
- ❖ Made from the one material > our common humanity - our shared divinity
- ❖ Holding each other and the bowl, gently yet firmly, the hands of Christ around the hands of the woman, sharing the story, sharing the aspirations
- ❖ The cup overflowing > endless possibilities
- ❖ Open to the elements and to the eyes of all who pass or linger or enter the space > vulnerability

Questions for pondering

- ❖ Do we have a spirit of humility and willingness to embrace our vulnerability?
- ❖ Do we have a desire for healing, from within as well as across?
- ❖ Can we be trusting enough to share our ecclesial pain, the woundedness, the felt-absence, lack of authentic expression with our ecumenical other?
- ❖ What steps might we with others take to share our grief about those parts of our being that are 'false' or wounded and seek the ministering hands of our ecumenical other in becoming more authentic, more fully who we are and who God made us to be?
- ❖ What disposition, do we need to develop in our church to enable us to share our 'dying to self', our need for healing, with the other and to let the other help us be more fully our authentic selves?

Ways forward

In conversation recently, some church people described areas where their own tradition has veered away from its core truth, its core expression of faith, from its authentic being, where a major strength may have developed an aspect of weakness:

- ❖ Our tradition has always focused on the Word of God. Sometimes that's accompanied by a level of arrogance
- ❖ Our structures and systems have a habit of taking away the voices of people at the edges
- ❖ We are possessive and even defensive of our Evangelical emphasis
- ❖ We have a tendency of judgementalism towards people from other tradition and even towards people outside of the church
- ❖ We tend to focus on congregational decision making at the expense of visionary leadership
- ❖ When discussing issues of morality we quickly lose our ability to dialogue.

Receptive Ecumenism invites members of a Synod, Council, Board, Agency, Committee etc to reflect on those areas that may no longer be authentic expressions of faith in their 'patch of the garden' and to be open to turning to our sisters and brothers in Christ, asking them to hold the cup with us...to help us recover our authentic self and to let us be open to God leading us on to our best possibilities...

- ❖ Ecclesial Examen - consider our weakness or vulnerabilities in relation to our own truth – especially in relation to our practices, structures and decision-making
- ❖ Whenever we are at a meeting, ensuring that there is space and time to draw out authenticity/truths through sharing of any area of not knowing, or mis-understandings, about relationships, action, inaction, behaviour, about what is really going on
- ❖ Learn, through the other, how we can become even more Christ-like, grow more authentically into who we are and develop further our receptivity to the gift of unity in Christ.

For more about some of these see Receptive Ecumenism Booklet, *Healing Gifts for Wounded Hands*: http://www.sacc.asn.au/data/Receptive_Ecumenism_Booklet.pdf

3. Receptive Ecumenism - an encounter with Love

“Receptive ecumenical awakening is properly a matter of the heart before it is a matter of the head; a matter of falling in love with the experienced presence of God in the people, practices, even structures of another tradition and being impelled thereby to search for ways in which all impediments to closer relationship might be overcome.” *Professor Paul D Murray*

The way of Receptive Ecumenism is grounded in the Trinitarian God, in the richness of relationships with God and with one another and all of creation. It is laden with the potential for the power of love to transform. This applies as much to ecclesial change and greater flourishing in Christ, **from within** as well as across and beyond.

Receptive Ecumenism invites us to a deep experience of love, of discovering how when our eyes are fixed on Christ and Christ's ways, we discover more deeply how to gaze more lovingly on one another and of all of Creation, in the same way that God gazes on each one of us:

- ❖ beckoning one another on to our best possibilities
- ❖ letting ourselves be drawn into all we are and all we can be
- ❖ yearning for the light of Christ to shine in all expressions of our life of faith

Photo 3 <http://www.flickr.com/photos/7383661@N08/7381480512/>

In this close up we notice especially the eyes > fixed firmly on one another, trusting and loving one another ...we notice the bird droppings, and the cob-webs...reminding us of our vulnerability and 'in for the long haul' that so often mark our journey in love.

Ancient philosophers and mystics used to say that, before being born, each soul is kissed by God and then goes through life always, in some dark way, remembering that kiss and measuring everything in relation to its original sweetness.

Inside each of us, there is a dark memory of having once been touched and caressed by hands far gentler than our own. That caress has left a permanent imprint inside us, one so tender and good that its memory becomes a prism through which we see everything else.

Thus we recognize love and truth outside of us precisely because they resonate with something that is already inside us. Things 'touch our hearts' because they awaken a memory of that original kiss. Moreover, because we have a memory of once having been perfectly touched, caressed, and loved, every experience we meet in life falls a little short. We have already had something deeper. When we feel frustrated, angry, betrayed, violated, or enraged it is because our outside experience does not honour what we already know and cling to inside.

'Living In Exile' *Ron Rolheiser, OMI*

Questions for pondering

- ❖ What are we holding on to from our perception of the other that prevents us from ‘falling in love with the experienced presence of God in the people, practices, even structures, of another tradition’?
- ❖ What do we need to let go of > competitiveness, feelings of smugness or superiority, preoccupation with numbers, finance, knowledge, being right ... fear of looking vulnerable, fear of the ‘long haul’...?
- ❖ What do we need to hold on to in letting our eyes be drawn into gazing on the other the way God gazes on them?
- ❖ How can we create safe spaces for discovery and for learning from one another, for receiving the giftedness of the other, for ongoing inner conversion and for growing more fully into who God made us to be, of becoming more beautifully, more authentically and more lovingly all who God has called us to be.

Ways forward

- ❖ Acknowledging our vulnerabilities, knowing God and the other are gazing lovingly on us and want us to be all we can be...
- ❖ Attending to one another not only in our need but attentive also to each other’s greater flourishing through making space for the other and being proactive in assisting the other to be their very best:

To pray and to do all we can to enable Anglicans to be the best Anglicans they can be, the Baptists be the best Baptists they can be, the Catholics to be the best Catholics they can be ... for the churches in their diversity to become so attractive in every fibre of their being that the world is drawn to them and to the beauty, truth and love that each offers...

Conclusion

Receptive Ecumenism is about the Churches together:

- ❖ Celebrating all we have already done and will continue to do together
- ❖ Re-imagining the vision and the disposition for our journey together in new ways
- ❖ Being open to sharing with and learning from one another
- ❖ Becoming more fully who we are called to be – institutionally as well as individually
- ❖ Becoming so aligned in Christ that we’d each be reflecting the light of Christ, and gazing on one another more beautifully, more truthfully and more lovingly – within, across and beyond our Church

so that the world is inspired and encouraged to believe in the beauty, truth and love of all God’s creation.