

## BISHOPS and UNITY

When Bishop Christopher of Southwark last came to Saint Michael's he said what a pleasure it was to come to the church in his diocese that has *more candles than any other!*

**Bishop Christopher** has been a great friend to this parish, and so it was a joy to see that he recently celebrated his 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary as Bishop of Southwark – so today I want to give thanks for his ministry as our bishop which (I hasten to add) continues – by thinking about what a bishop actually *is*.

In the first century, **Ignatius of Antioch** wrote to the Christians of Smyrna asking: *'Do you all follow the bishops as Jesus Christ followed the Father?'*

What he was saying is that unity with one's bishop is also unity with other Christians, as Christ was united with his Father.

All this is very appropriate today which is also **Christian Unity Sunday**. Typically, we think of Christian unity in external terms as being about our relationship with different kinds of Christians – but our own internal unity as a Church is just as important.

It's through Bishop Christopher that we are united with all the other churches in this diocese that are also under his care. And then it's through Bishop Christopher's relationship with other Bishops both in this country and around the world that we know we are part of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion. We can think of bishops as 'knots in the net', part of what holds the church together. Of course, bishops aren't the only knots that hold the Church together – there's also a common understanding of the Sacraments, the Scriptures and the Creeds – but they are a fundamental part of what it means to be united as one Church.

**This unity represented by our bishop is not only about breadth in space, but also depth in time.** What I mean is that we trace back a line of bishops who have consecrated more bishops all the way back to Apostles – and it's why we say Bishop's *represent* the Apostles themselves. Indeed, the rather curious hat worn by a bishop known as a **mitre** is meant to look one of tongues of flame that appeared over the Apostles at Pentecost. Apostolic Succession (as it's technically known) is about us having a direct link to Christ himself.

I don't know about you, but I find this idea tremendously exciting.

**And it's not only a historical link, but also a relational one.**

In today's Gospel we hear that:

*'Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding'*.

The close relationship between Jesus and his disciples is the same *type* of relationship that a bishop has with his people.

That's why the bishop carries a **crozier** – the shepherd's staff that represents the ministry of loving care that Christ gave to the Apostles when he told them to *'tend my sheep'*.

I once read that the curved end of a shepherd's crook isn't used to hook the sheep, but for the shepherd to lean on in the field – spending time with the sheep until they learn to trust him. As people united under the bishop's pastoral care we receive the ministry of Christ that was given to the Apostles.

Successors of the Apostles they may be, but **humans** they still are, and have their failings. For example, take Douglas Feaver, Bishop of Peterborough, who was known in his time as the rudest man in the Church of England. He once said of his parishes that there were only two kinds, *'the important and the self-important'*. He famously disliked children because (he said) *'they leak at both ends'*.

Of a more serious nature were the failings of the 17<sup>th</sup> century **Archbishop, Lancelot Blackburne**. His was less the behaviour of a cleric and more like a pirate. Such were his carnal appetites that on his death a poet penned the lines:

*'All the buxom damsels of the north/who knew his parts/lament their going forth' ... !*

Of course, such extreme naughtiness is the exception rather than the norm, and most bishops have at least some goodness and holiness which commended them for that office in the first place.

Our unity with our bishop is also a **unity in faith** – a faith that is handed down from the Apostles to the present day. The bishop has a special duty to guard and share that faith which is expressed afresh in every generation but never changed in any *essential* aspect. This unity in faith is expressed in a piece of furniture – the **cathedra** or bishop's seat, from which cathedrals get their name. That might seem rather odd until you know that in the ancient world, philosophers taught sitting down. Even today we speak of a professor holding the 'chair' of a particular subject in a university. The bishop's throne is a sign of their authority to teach and our unity in faith with them.

Of course, **none of this means you can't disagree with a bishop** – far from it!

Indeed, disagreement with bishops has been one of the special talents of those of a more High Church persuasion as we are here at Saint Michael's.

When **St John Henry Newman** was asked by his bishop to stop writing his controversial Tracts for the Times, he did so not because he *agreed* with him, but because he *respected* his office.

I can tell, you I've disagreed with a fair few bishops, not always quite so respectfully, it has to be said!

After all, **bishops aren't more important** than any other Christian *per se*.

In today's reading from Revelation, St John falls down at the feet of the Angel who cries out:

*'You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus – worship God!'*

The only rank any Christian has comes from Baptism.

When we kneel before a Bishop (at something like a Confirmation) it is because of their representative rather than their hierarchical role.

In theory (if not always in practice) the church has no hierarchy,

only a flat structure of Christians each performing a different ministry to which they have been called in God's service.

As the Angel says to St John, we are all *'fellow servants'*.

Quit rightly, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity normally focuses on the divisions among Christians, but it is also important to **celebrate our unity**.

in giving thanks for our bishop today,

we affirm that unity with Christ, with the Apostles, and with other Christians,

that is represented but also effected by the office he holds,

even as we pray for the fuller realisation of Christ's prayer that we may be one even as he is one with the Father.