Editorial: The Ecumenical Endeavour

The Very Revd. Professor Martyn Percy

I welcome the articles in this 9th volume of *Orientis Aura* that address the deeper pulses that still drive the ecumenical endeavour. These include reception and hospitality, mutuality in learning, the valuing of diversity and difference, and dialogue and discernment. I understand many regard these pulses – or valid, valued ecclesial concepts – as risky. For each, in their own way, calls for a degree of openness and vulnerability. But to detractors, it only presumes that our most cherished theological and ecclesial proclivities are about to be watered down, or negotiated away. Correspondingly, there has been an assumption that ecumenism, as an agent or catalyst, has a liberal agenda – a reductively driven homogenisation and pasteurisation of 'organic-raw' truth.

Of course, ecumenism is no such agent. Moreover, the appeal to mutuality, hospitality, mutual learning and dialogue is well-scripted in the scriptures. I will go further here and say that we can find Jesus practising a kind of ecumenism in the gospels. Jesus regularly praises the faith of foreigners, gentiles and those outside his own tradition. Jesus is something of an itinerant cross-border trespasser, reaching out beyond, and telling stories about Good Samaritans, ministering in non-Jewish territory, and affirming what he finds beyond his own margins and faith precincts.

Here, and in many respects, Jesus is the "body language of God". Simultaneously communicative and receptive; mutual, yet firm; learning yet teaching. Jesus, moreover, sees the unseen, hears the unheard, and touches the untouchable. His body is richly sensate and unafraid of receiving as well as giving.

The link between the incarnation and activity of Christ and between pneumatology and missiology freckles the pages of the New Testament and is even rehearsed in the Old Testament. Time and again, the people of Israel are aided by foreign agents who function as instruments of their salvation. Just as the early church had to learn that the Holy Spirit had been poured out on all flesh, and that salvation would not come only to, but also through gentiles. Ecumenism, then, when it stresses mutuality and reception, hospitality and humility, merely traces the shapes of what the scriptures have already spoken.

To root this in an example, I need only think of the encounter between Jesus and an unnamed woman at Jacob's Well (*John* 4:1-42). The well is still in Israel, and in Nablus, on the West Bank (Palestinian). Built over it is a Greek monastery, and it

was here, in 1979, that Sophocles Hasapis, the parish priest and guardian of the well, lost his life. He was viciously killed by fundamentalist Jewish settlers, who resented the presence of the small community of monks there, and the Christian shrine built on and over what they felt was a sacred Jewish site. Then they threw a grenade into the church. The Well could not be more contested: Jewish, Christian, Muslim – ancient and modern, it resides oddly in a sprawling Palestinian town, living with its multiple identities.

Religion is an affair of the heart as much as the head. It inspires great passion – love, and of course, hate. To some extent, the encounter that Jesus has at Jacob's Well with the unnamed woman is rooted in those same dynamics. Contested space and arguments over what is sacred; hatred and fear of people who see faith differently.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that purity and power are only issues for small and kraal-like religious groups. Purity and power are issues for all Christians and all churches, and fundamentalism and extremism, as a phenomenon or subject to study, is simply a concentration of a 'problem' that affects many different faiths, including all forms of Christianity, including those that espouse liberalism or openness. Boundaries of definition can quickly become borders marking territory and, ultimately, evolve into barriers.

And it is into this that Jesus walks. He has started to go back to Galilee, where we are treated to a story about water and wells that never run dry. But before he can get to Galilee from Judea, he must pass through Samaria – he has to cross a region that is, by definition, a place of taint and compromise that is normally to be avoided. But Jesus does not need to pass through Samaria; he could have chosen the route that follows the Jordan Valley, and avoids Samaria. So, John, in stating that Jesus had to pass through Samaria, is not making a cartographical point. Jesus chooses this route in the same way that the Son of Man must suffer (*Mark* 8: 31). The accent is on Jesus' obligation to a deeper path that remains concealed from most of those who follow him. This is why Jesus arrives in the town of Sychar (*John* 4:5-6), taking a seat at Jacob's Well (thereby linking Jesus with the Patriarchs), and John tells us that Jesus is 'tired'. It is the sixth hour.

It is here that the Samaritan woman enters the story (*John* 4:7). The time of day of her entry is critical, as it suggests her marginality. Water is traditionally drawn at dusk or early in the morning, when it is cool. But the sixth hour is noon, when the sun is at its hottest, suggesting that this woman's company is questionable; she is something of an outsider even within her own community. The woman is also

unnamed – possibly a coding her as 'undesirable', or as a 'sinner'. What is startling, therefore, is Jesus' direct address to her: 'Give me a drink'. Furthermore, notes John, the disciples have all left to buy provisions: there is no mutual hospitality between Jews and Samaritans. This means that Jesus and the woman are alone.

On one level, this request can be read as a gesture of reconciliation. Jesus asks something of a Samaritan and a woman. Jesus needs her help, and he asks for it. But this gesture is, of course, met with astonishment: 'How can you ask anything of me, a Samaritan?' And the response from Jesus only serves to widen her eyes, for Jesus states that if she knew who she was talking to and what God gives, it is she who would be asking for water – 'living water'. Or more accurately, in the Greek, this is 'running water' – an echo of that which *flows* from the rock in the desert from the staff of Moses (*Exodus* 17: 5; *Numbers* 20: 11).

John is, in other words, making a contrast between the still, perhaps even stale water of the well, and the water of life that Jesus speaks of. This is water that literally brings life. The conversation, like the depth of the well, goes another stage deeper at this point. The woman's question is laced with rhetorical tropes: "Are you greater than Jacob?" Where do you get this living water from? John turns the woman's astonishment into curiosity – she wades into the deeper waters of the conversation. And again, the conversation turns on – what to us must seem like a staged artificiality – to draw the woman in even deeper. Jesus says: 'Anyone who drinks from this well will be thirsty again…but whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst again'.

The Well, just as it was violently contested in 1979, was also contested in Jesus' day. Here we have a sacred site in disputed ownership. But Jesus' ministry returns the Well to Common Ownership. By reaching out to the woman and talking about the true water of life, he is asking us to put our differences aside and focus on the deep unity we share.

A vital key to ecumenism may lie here, and it is one that this volume, the editors and authors, are fully alive to. If one denomination can learn to live in humility and grace with its profound differences – and not allow itself to be destroyed by pride and anger, or by self-righteousness, or by imputing denigration on another denominational path – then there may be hope for deeper cross-party denominational rapport to develop. Ultimately, unity cannot be imposed: it has to be discovered and cultivated, organically.

I am often struck by Jesus' teaching on purity, and his ecumenical credentials are especially sharp in this respect. "Beware the leaven of the Pharisees" (e.g., *Luke* 12:1-3) might appear to many readers as a clear and hostile warning about a branch of faith. That most Bible translations substitute 'leaven' for 'yeast' does not help us, as yeast is an ingredient separate from dough, added to it to make it rise. But the hearers of Jesus' original words would have understood him quite differently. Because yeast was a virtually unknown ingredient in bread-making in the ancient world, it is the 'leaven' that we should attend to. Leaven comes from yesterday's bread and is the naturally occurring sourdough microbes that produce the slight fermentation in the dough, causing it to rise. Each batch of bread will be made fresh, daily. But each loaf uses a tiny amount of yesterday's bread, with its natural 'mould', to make the new loaf lighter, and to rise. Paying close attention to Jesus' words, we also note that he does not reject the leaven of the Pharisees – only that we should beware of it.

So, Jesus' warning about leaven constitutes a far more subtle image than it first appears. We are being inducted into an arresting allegory, for Jesus is inviting us to see that we are composed, in our faith tradition, through the new and the old, and through the fresh and the mouldy. No one would sit and eat yesterday's moulding dough. But you cannot make new bread without it. There is something in the words of Jesus, therefore, that invites us to contemplate kneading, proportionality and purity. Jesus is arguing against radical purity and asking us to recognise that even in new expressions of faith, there will be shared ingredients and a blend.

Jesus' words remind us that just as the fresh bread of his day needed to be baked with a small amount of the moulding dough of the previous day, so our faith needs to remember that we can never be fully set apart from those (like the Pharisees) that we now regard ourselves as being so utterly unlike. 'Leaven', therefore, is a cypher: it emphasises the need for charity, reception and discernment. For we are connected. And the hearers of Jesus' words would have understood that the leaven meant that even in a new expression of faith, some of the old would be present, necessary and generative.

In view of the lesson of the leaven, what can we learn from Jacob's Well, Jesus and the Samaritan woman for our own ecumenical endeavour? The story ends as it began – with a tale of an unexpected encounter, with themes of taint, surprise and boundary crossing redolent in the text. A group of Samaritans now come to see Jesus, prompted by the unnamed woman. This in turn prompts an excursus from Jesus about the harvest – a cypher for God's abundance, but also judgment. But it

is now obvious (if also perhaps puzzling to the disciples) that Jesus, throughout this encounter, is making a profound series of political statements about the nature of the kingdom and the Messiah. We can summarise these briefly.

First, it is God, who in Christ, comes to the Samaritans, and engages with them on their own territory and in their own idiom and dialect. This was not the obvious route for Jesus to take to reach Galilee – he chose to deviate and allow himself to be deliberately distracted.

Second, the message to the Samaritans is not 'become a Jew like me', but rather 'there is a time when tribal boundaries will cease to matter', and genuine faith will not be about which party, sect or denomination one belongs to, but instead be about 'spirit and truth'. Christians – or perhaps we should say, denominations – need to be reminded that the establishment of the Kingdom of God is the main project, and not the maintenance of churches.

Third, this is a story of radical inclusiveness. Indeed, in some respects, this is a story about reception and convergence, and commonality. As is so often the case in the gospels, Jesus is fraternising with people who raise questions about his taste, discernment and even purity. But Jesus is not interested in the labels we impute upon each other. This is all about abundant grace. Jesus meets us all on the one, same level.

Jesus' work with the Samaritans carries an important message for us in ecumenical endeavour. For Jesus, in reaching out to the Samaritans as equals, makes a decisive contribution to that elusive search for true unity – one that respects the dignity of difference. Ecumenism is not driving towards a reductively driven homogenisation and pasteurisation of 'raw' truth, in order to manufacture something that is a compromise for all tastes. Rather, it is a search for the genuine differences between us that will further illuminate our pilgrimage journey together, even as we also celebrate our shared commonalities.

I welcome this 9th volume of *Orientis Aura*, which stresses the open nature of learning and mutuality – if we are to discern the pedagogy of the Holy Spirit. The authors are to be congratulated on their prescient, rich and vibrant range of perspectives that speaks into the heart and soul of what it is to travel together, celebrate our unity, confess our divisions, but rejoice in our diversity. In the midst of this, what ecumenical endeavour has taught us is that difference is not a sign of weakness, but rather of strength.