



Christian Unity

"I respect people from all religions. Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, Hindus. I respect people from all religions..."

If not that, I've heard sentences like that hundreds of times during my ministry. Usually, I nod my head and smile. It's mostly well meant.

But underneath it is an unfortunate misunderstanding, in that it equates the difference between Catholics and Protestants with the difference between Christians and Muslims.

Just to be clear, in the case of the latter, we're talking about different faiths; in the case of the former, we're talking about denominations within the same faith. Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal: we're all Christians. We're not from different religions; we're from the same faith.

So whereas, as a Christian, I would say that Islam is a religion I respect but that it has a fundamentally different insight into God than mine; as a Christian Anglican, I would say that the Catholic and the Anglican insight into God is essentially the same; we just have different flavours. We're NOT different religions.

Yet while I find it frustrating that people so often conflate the two, the other side of the coin is that I cannot exactly complain as it is the Christian predilection for forming different denominations that has caused the confusion in the first place. And it is a crying shame.

Jesus quite clearly intended for us all to be one: we should be one in Christ: one church, one faith, one baptism (as St Paul put it). And yet we have managed to spiral into numerous variations, often for pretty bad reasons.

Famously, the Church of England might well not exist (as a separate entity from the Roman Catholic church) had Henry VIII not needed a new wife through whom to father a son. It was hardly a principled stand. In the case of Methodism, some would argue that it should never have been a different church at all, but just remained a movement of spiritual reinvigoration and discipline, within the wider church.

There is, though, some hope. Christians stopped burning each other some centuries ago. Two hundred years ago, in England, we even allowed Catholics to vote. One hundred years ago, we allowed them into our universities. And here in Surbiton, as different faiths, we regularly meet together, pray together and find projects where we can work together.

In case you don't know, this is the week of Prayer for Christian Unity. And it's what each church in the area will pray for. We all acknowledge it's some distance off; for example, an unfortunate consequence of women becoming priests is that we Anglicans are further from unity with the Catholics than we were, say, in the Sixties. But one day, I believe, we will be one.

January 2018. for the Train is a short column written by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train, or elsewhere. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at