

In case any of you weren't present yesterday afternoon, I bring warm fraternal greetings from the Archbishop of Canterbury and from the other Anglican Benedictine communities.

One of my roles in my community is that of Infirmarian, and I have learned that when someone cuts themselves, it is very important to nip the two sides of the cut together while the wound is fresh. Once the faces of the wound dry, no amount of pressure will make them knit together....a good metaphor for the work of ecumenism. It is only when the wound is 'alive' – when both sides are 'alive with the love and passion of Christ' that real unity can occur. No amount of theological debate can unite two people whose faith is not alive and who have little or no sense of the Church as the Body of Christ – or of Christ as the Vine and themselves as branches.

My community was founded in 1941 to pray and work for the unity of the Church. At that time 'unity' was understood as the reconciliation of the different denominations, and particularly the Anglican Communion with the Roman Catholic Church. As time has gone on, we have understood that Christ's prayer is 'that ALL may be one', as he and the Father are one...and that is as much about two individuals as it is about two large denominations.

But little seeds can grow.

A little history: In England in the mid eighteenth century, much of the Church was fairly bankrupt spiritually. Along came two young priests, brothers, John and Charles Wesley. John had had an experience of 'spiritual awakening' when he had felt his 'heart strangely warmed'. They began an itinerant preaching ministry, and in parishes where they were not made welcome in the church, they preached outside. Their teaching affirmed an Arminian affirmation of grace, frequent Communion and a disciplined corporate search for holiness. They had a deep concern for education and the poor, for liturgical revision, and the training of lay people as teachers and preachers. They founded a vibrant and highly disciplined movement within the Church of England, and organised their followers into what they called 'classes' – groups of ten or so, which met weekly for study and to be accountable to the class leader for their observance of the discipline of daily prayer, for how the Scriptures had been read and pondered, how their faith had been put into practice during the previous week. Sadly, the institutional Church wasn't ready to welcome them, and, though John and Charles remained loyal Anglican priests, their followers became known as Methodists and gradually separated from the Established Church.

Archbishop Justin regards Methodism very much as a Religious Order, a gift God had prepared to revive the life of the Church in the eighteenth century, but which the Church shunned.

In recent years there have been many attempts to reconcile the Methodist Church with the Anglican Church of England – schemes worked out by theologians and the ecclesiastical hierarchies – but all have foundered, either because of the lack of will at local level or in the governing bodies. The two sides of the wound were dry and didn't knit! But in places there was life, and in Birmingham Anglican and Methodist ordinands began to train together. In other places, local ecumenical experiences took root and at last a Covenant to work together towards the full visible unity of the two churches was signed in 2003. A 'Covenant Implementation Group' was set up to facilitate the growth towards unity.

In 2008 a young Methodist presbyter asked to come to live alongside our community in order to learn more about the Benedictine monastic tradition that had so influenced John and Charles

Wesley. He was given permission to spend a year with us. At the end of the year he was given permission to explore a novitiate, and then to make Profession in Simple Vows for three years.

Meanwhile the Covenant Implementation Group had begun to look at the whole question of Monastic Vows – something they had never imagined they would have to do! If it came to Solemn Vows, who would hold them? The Archbishop of Canterbury who holds the Anglicans' vows couldn't. Who would have the competence to release him from Solemn Vows? Could a presbyter remain in what they call 'full connexion' if he was a monk? Every year the governing body of the Methodist Church places its presbyters and deacons in their pastoral charge – but a monk is at the bidding of his abbot and makes a vow of stability.

All these questions were addressed, and everyone involved was extremely gracious at every step. The Governing Body – which they call 'Conference' would hold his vows. In the event of release being requested, the President of Conference, after consulting with a 'group of reference', would have the competence, and the Stationing Committee, which advises Conference on the stationing of presbyters and deacons, affirmed the implications of the vow of Monastic Stability and the Abbot's authority.

...and so it was that on 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014, Brother Ian Mead made his Solemn Vows as the first Methodist Benedictine monk at Mucknell Abbey. The President of Conference was there – who until recently had been the Methodist minister in Rome and the representative of Methodism to the Vatican. The local Chair of District – the equivalent to Diocesan Bishop – presided at the Eucharist and preached, and in the preparation for his sermon, he researched the experience of the early years of the Methodist Movement and discovered how 'monastic' they really were, and realised how, as Methodism had settled down over the years it had lost that monastic vibrancy. If it really is to become a gift to a united Church, this is something it has to recover. Br Ian is consequently much in demand to lead retreats and quiet days for the Methodist clergy and lay preachers, and we see an increasing number coming to the monastery on retreat or dropping in for Mass or an Office.

At the same time, Archbishop Justin is saying that the Church of England needs the vibrant monastic charism of Methodism, which it was unable to embrace in the eighteenth century, if it is to become what he believes God needs it to be in the twenty first century. Br Ian is one of the monastic members of the Church of England's 'Young Vocations Group' and is the co-ordinator of the Anglican Novice Guardians' Group...in a quiet way contributing to the vital work of ecumenism, and we are extremely grateful to have him as a member of our community.

When I was here four years ago I recounted how he had been asked by a friend at the end of the first year of his novitiate how he felt: 45% Methodist and 55% Benedictine. The same friend asked just after his First Vows: 20% Methodist and 80% Benedictine. I asked him recently and he said, "100% Methodist and 100% Benedictine" – which sounds right to me!

We now have a young Swedish Lutheran priest beginning the journey!