FINAL WORSHIP, CTE FORUM, OCTOBER 2012

**What does love require of you?**

**John 13.34 and 35**

**I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.**

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, – you and I have been in a privileged ecumenical space these last two days: we’ve waited together in prayer and in bible study, we’ve reflected on the ecumenical journey so far, considered new agendas for the future, eaten and drank together - and enjoyed one another. What is it that you will take from our privileged time? I think I shall take two things.

The first is a renewed conviction that the ecumenical task is not to create some great architectural construction of the Church based on brilliant agreed doctrinal consensus statements, or cleverly constructed ecumenical joinery, though I am the first to acknowledge that we do need doctrinal statements on those things that were the causes of our division; we do need structures that enable us, structures of grace; and we do need to intensify our action together for the hurting and violent world. But what we most need is a new confidence that, in spite of our ecclesial separations, we really do have a common belief in God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit and we really do believe in that mysterious relationship of mutual giving and receiving love that binds the persons of the Trinity in one, that mutual attentativeness, that perfect conformity of minds and wills that is the very life of God – evocatively captured in the way words can’t in the Rublev icon of the Holy Trinity, a gift of the Russian Orthodox Church to us. That life has been poured out in love for the life of the world, in the dying of Jesus. In that act everything has been changed for all time, for all eternity. We share in that life as we abide in his love. We need to go on re-assuring one another that in spite of our ecclesial separations, our different views of Eucharist, or ministry, or primacy, or our different responses to the perplexing, complex ethical issues of our day, we really do believe in the same God and we believe that the unity of the Church has everything to do with making God’s own life of love visible in such a way that new possibility is seen in the way we live together, for the life of the world.

We are to reveal to the world by the way we live and love, God’s loving intention for the whole world. Remember those qualities of love Paul talks of in Corinthians 13: patience, kindness, not insisting on our own way; not irritable or resentful but enduring all things –qualities that judge our personal lives and our communal lives. These are ecumenical virtues. We can only live in that way as far as we participate in the very life of the Triune God. God’s life is the source of our loving attitudes and actions and the ground of our unity and the source of forgiveness when we fail. We belong to one another for no other reason than that we are enfolded in God’s life of love, in the communion of God’s love. Love binds the persons of the Trinity in one; love binds God to us; love binds us to God ; and love binds us to one another in the love of God. It is God’s life, God’s life of love, that is the source of our unity and it is that love we are to show in the world. That’s why, as Rowan Williams keeps telling us - ’The Church and its unity have to look like God and radiate and speak of God’s own life.’ To live apart from one another is to contradict the very nature of God’s own being, to contradict love. To be visibly one is the only truly credible way to manifest God’s love in our broken and hurting world. That is our ecumenical vocation: there can be no turning back.

We’ve experienced something of unity, a profound degree of communion, haven’t we, in this place in our praying together, as joined in Christ, through the power of the Spirit, we have stood together where Jesus stands and prayed together as Jesus prayed –‘ Our Father’. Prayer has to be the foundation and motivating force of all our striving for visible unity. It’s not theological discussion, not action for Justice and peace, essential as these things are, that will empower our ecumenical agenda. Our primary and constantly recreating activity is prayer: waiting on God together in silence as the Society of Friends help us to understand; responding to God in joyful hymn singing, as Methodists encourage us; being led in confident extemporary prayer as the Black Majority churches show us; pondering the Word of Scripture together as Lutherans tell us; letting the Spirit fill us as the Pentecostals show us; captivated by the beauty and suggestiveness of icons as the Orthodox show us; being together in that intimacy of communion in which words, music, art and silence all have their place. And, I don’t think we can give up on struggling to reach full Eucharistic communion. It is in Eucharist that we mysteriously make a memorial, *anamnesis*, of God’s supreme act of love in sending the Son and Jesus’ perfect act of returning - love in his self-offering to the Father for us sinners. It is there that we receive the benefits of his passion and from there are sent out to live and work to God’s praise and glory. It’s this life, God’s life of unity in love that we experience most profoundly and mysteriously in prayer that we are called to live together in a life where the abundant gifts of the Spirit are used in service of one another, in service of the world and the whole creation.

And there is a second thing, closely linked to this that I’ve been convinced of in this privileged time together. Again it’s something that Archbishop Rowan hints at so often. That’s the need to develop as we go on together a new kind of expectation in ecumenical encounter- an expectation that when we look at one another and when we really listen – and that means learning to stand where the other stands and to see things through their eyes and hear them with their ears – it’s then that we shall recognise in one another, a fidelity to the same Lord; the same Gospel of salvation for all people, and the same faithful response lived out in their service and mission; we shall recognise the same life of Christ, the life of love, because they, like us, are receivers of the same grace, the same love of God. We need to be ready, as Robert Runcie once said, to genuflect to others as carriers of Christ. We need an ‘ecumenism of recognition’. Wouldn’t such an attitude of expectancy that we can recognise Christ’s love in the life and witness of the others change our ecumenical endeavour from often tedious negotiation to grace filled encounter, an encounter of love? We shall discover that we can love one another if we are ready to recognise the love of Christ in the life of others. Then we shall be prepared to stay together, never saying, ‘I have no need of you’, never giving up on one another but working through our painful differences, and they are painful, and some of us have experienced that here. We have to stick with the pain of difference, bear each other’s pain and even enter into each other’s pain, believing that God’s love will draw us together, deeper and deeper into God’s love.

So, let each of us go out from here believing that the unity we are called to make visible – is none other than the unity of God’s own life, a life of love, self- sacrificial love. Let’s go out eager to recognise Christ present in the faith, worship, sacraments, ministry, service and mission of others. If we concentrate on recognising Christlikeness in one another this will surely transform the ecumenical journey into an encounter of love, a collision of love. The ecumenical way is a sacred task of love: and requires of us a holy disposition of love.

‘I give you a new commandment that you love one another as I have loved you’. Beautiful words but terrifying words: Jesus’ love for us took him to suffering and to the Cross. That is the love we are enfolded in, a love at whose heart is forever a Cross. That is the costly love we are to show forth. The God who is love, requires of us love, love which is shown in a life of costly unity with one another and costly service in the world. Let love undergird and flood all our ecumenical efforts, our doctrinal conversations, our shared witness and service and above all our shared prayer. If we can do this we may one day, as Cardinal Kasper once said, wake up and rub our eyes and see what God’s love has already done among us and with us. Unity in which diversity blossoms beyond anything we can imagine now, will be the fruit God’s act of love, uniting us with one another in his love.

What does love require of us? The God who is love requires of us love. Amen

Mary Tanner CTE Forum, November 2012