

“BEHOLD, HOW GOOD AND PLEASANT”

Sitting at table with his disciples on the night of his arrest, our Lord took bread, blessed and broke it, and said, “This is my body which is broken for you.” Later in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed as it were great drops of blood and asked the Father if it were possible to take that breaking of his body, the cup of his passion, from him, so dreadful was the work, adding, of course, “Nevertheless, not as I will but as thou wilt.” St. John records another prayer of our Lord uttered earlier that same evening while the disciples were still at table with him. This prayer, recorded in John 17, also began with a focus on the work of the cross that loomed before our Lord, but moved on quickly to focus on the disciples he would leave behind, and he prayed for them, “Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one as we are” (Jn. 17:11). Again a few verses later, looking further into the future, he said, “Neither pray I for these alone; but for them also which shall believe on me through their word, that they may be one, as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (vv. 20-21). Surely he foresaw that it was not his physical body alone that would be broken like bread, but his mystical body, the Church. So he prayed most earnestly that they...might...be...one. This prayer is not so often thought of as the one in the Garden of Gethsemane, but it touches on the very center of his message. He told the disciples earlier after washing their feet, “A new commandment I give unto you, That you love one another; as I have loved you. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (13:34-35). That unity for which he then prayed is the embodiment and exhibition of that love which he commanded, that love of which he was about to provide the greatest example.

Centuries have passed—two millennia in fact—since that night of nights and some might wonder if that prayer recorded for us by St. John has been not been totally forgotten as Christians have divided one against another over issues large and small, and sometimes seemingly over no issue at all but simply personalities, or turf, or cultural differences, or liturgical idiosyncrasies. There have been major divisions, like that of the Great Schism of 1054 between the Eastern Churches and that of the West, then half a

millennia later that of the Protestant Reformation, then many, many, many more, too numerous to name until the Church is divided and splintered and shredded into fine crumbs. Mind you, I am not talking here about the differences between those who believe and who do not believe or between the faithful and heretics—that is another matter. I'm talking about differences among believers, among those who our Lord said shall believe on me through the apostle's word. The reason I am focusing on this today, apart from the fact that it is a lifelong passion of mine, is that this is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which is celebrated or observed (or more often neglected) each year from January the 18th through the 25th, and this year the week has a greater prominence because it happens to begin on a Sunday and end on a Sunday.

The Week of Prayer for Christian unity was first observed on those January dates almost exactly a century ago. There were previous attempts to establish such a week. The Lambeth Conference of 1878 called for the observance of a special season of such prayer around Ascension Day. About that time Pope Leo XIII “enjoined upon Catholics throughout the world the first octave or novena of prayer for Christian Unity to be observed from the feast of the Ascension to Pentecost.” In 1908, however, two priests, Anglican at the time, Fr. Lewis Thomas Watson, an American, and Fr. Spencer Jones, an Englishman, called for its observance in January between the 18th, the Chair of St. Peter, and the 25th, the Conversion of St. Paul. In 1909 Pope Pius X approved the observance of the octave between these January dates.

The greatest impulse for the worldwide observance came a number of years later through the efforts of a Roman priest, Fr. Paul Couturier, who emphasized in all relationships across all divisions what he called “the primacy of charity,” echoing our Lord's “new commandment” and St. Paul's conclusion in I Cor. 13, that “now abide faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love.” “The primacy of charity” is a notion that must ever be at the forefront. It was as an extension of this principle that Fr. Couturier repeatedly cited what is called the ‘Testament of Cardinal Mercier,’ his good friend, which stated,

In order to unite with one another, we must love one another; in order to love one another, we must know one another; in order to know one another, we must go and meet one another.¹

In reflecting on these matters, I could not help from thinking about a certain psalm, and from the sermon title you may already have guessed which. It is that wonderful Psalm of just three verses, the 133rd.

Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!

It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that runs down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard, that went down to the skirts of his garments;

As the dew of Hermon that descended upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded his blessing, even life for evermore.

One commentator wrote, "To most people the first line of the psalm is appealing, but to some the second verse may seem grotesque—which shows how difficult it is to enter into the culture and emotions of ancient Israel."² That may be true at times, but here it does not seem so difficult.

Let's begin at the beginning: "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" John Calvin conjectures that King David wrote this psalm giving "thanks to God for the peace and harmony which had succeeded a long and melancholy state of confusion and division in the kingdom."³ During the first seven years he was king of Judah the nation was divided and at enmity. Then came the time when all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, acknowledging that he was king and saying, "Behold, we are thy bone and thy flesh.," and for the remaining 30 years of his reign the nation was one. "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" How beautiful it must have been. St. Augustine describes the harmony as "this sweet sound, this honeyed melody," and draws our attention to the unity of the early Church following the day of Pentecost when they shared all things and "continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat

¹ Geoffrey Curtis, *Paul Couturier and Unity in Christ* (Westminster, MD: J. William Eckenrode, 1964), p. 48.

² *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 401.

³ *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. II: *Joshua and the Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Associates, Publishers and Authors, n.d.), 1083.

with gladness and singleness of heart” (Acts 2:44-47). “Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”

The second verse seems to me not grotesque but beautiful. It compares the joy of fraternal harmony to the anointing of Aaron as the first high priest, an event carefully described both in the Book of Exodus (29:7) and Leviticus (8:12; 21:10). Understand first that oil, olive oil, was a symbol of joy and festivity. Psalm 45 spoke of “anointing with the oil of gladness” (v. 7). In a familiar and centrally important prophecy Isaiah said that the coming Messiah would give to mourners in Zion “beauty for ashes and the oil of gladness for mourning” (61:3), and, of course, the 23rd Psalm says, “Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.”

At the anointing of Aaron as High Priest, he was not just sprinkled with oil as were ordinary priests; rather was the oil poured over his head in generous quantity. Picture him, if you will, as “the deliciously scented oil slowly drips down the head and onto the beard.”⁴ It is a picture of joy abundant! And the oil runs down from his head to his beard to his shoulders and onto the breastplate, which bore the names of the 12 tribes of Israel (Ex. 28:9-12, 17-20). Thus did the whole nation receive in effect a kind of priestly anointing. As A. F. Kirkpatrick pictures it, “The streams of perfumed oil, carefully compounded with aromatic spices, would diffuse its fragrance all around, symbolizing the holy influence which should emanate from the blessing of brethren dwelling together in unity.”⁵ It’s hard to escape the symbolism here of the true High Priest, even Christ, whose very name means anointed, whose unique peace and unity he shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit, bestowing that blessedness upon the true Israel, the Church. He is the head of the Church from whom the oil of gladness flows down upon us, his mystical body, we whose names he wears upon his breast. “Behold how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”

That is a wonderful psalm upon which to reflect as we begin this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The Week of Prayer was brought into existence against a varied backdrop of divisions, disputes, discord and worse, most notably in 1896 when prospects of progress toward unity between the Church of England and that of Rome were dashed

⁴ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 784.

⁵ A.F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge: University Press, 1927), p. 771.

upon Leo XIII's issuing the bull *Apostolicae Curae* condemning Anglican orders as "absolutely null and utterly void," and later when similar aspirations at the Malines Conversations from 1921 to 1925 under the presidency of Cardinal Mercier failed to come to fruition. Fr. Couturier was also greatly exercised through contacts with Russian churchman over the separation of the Eastern Orthodox.

We ought to be concerned and pray for all of these divisions of the Church, over all that separates any of those for whom our Lord prayed from one another. My more immediate thoughts this week, however, concern matters that are closer to home, concern those who are nearest to us both theologically and geographically. I am troubled when I think of that part of Christ's Church in south Florida that stands in the Anglican tradition and that seeks to embrace and remain faithful to the historic Christian faith as expressed therein. I grieve that that particular part of Christ's body, small though it is, is so divided in manifold ways, almost diced up, as it were. I want to deal next week with what the Prayer Book collect describes as "the dangers of our unhappy divisions." This week we are concerned with the positive, and in this regard, though it was but a tiny foretaste, I need to say how pleased I was at our afternoon service on the Second Sunday Advent to have Anglican priests from a good number of different jurisdictions together, awaiting and praying for the two-fold advent of our Lord, all of whom had responded to my invitation without hesitation. "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!"

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