

THE DANGERS OF DIVISIONS

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It seems an exotic topic or at least one far removed from our concerns. All right, we do at least acknowledge that it was a matter of sufficiently high priority that our Lord addressed it at some length and with some specificity on the eve of his crucifixion, and we know that the unity of the Church is among its four marks of identity as set forth in the Nicene Creed—one, holy, catholic and apostolic—but we somehow assume that our Lord’s prayer has been fulfilled and that the unity he envisioned is somehow, invisibly perhaps, an accomplished reality. Or, to be more realistic, we are aware that manifold divisions do in fact exist but know that they have been there seemingly forever and, as experience teaches, are bound to increase more and more, but what does that matter to us and what can we do about it anyway? Precious little, we think, and seldom give it a second thought. We have our little church to which we come week by week and we are happy with it, more or less. Let us be. Let concern for greater unity be a matter for ecumenists, about whom we don’t care very much. They are a liberal sort anyway, by and large, empty headed dreamers who care little for the precious truths of our past and present and are ready to sell them all for a bowl full of porridge.

Fortunately our liturgy, the Missal and the Prayer Book, will not let us get by with such muddleheaded thinking. It drives the point home again and again so that if we are not totally insensitive we have to realize that the point is serious. Near the very beginning of the ‘Prayer for the Whole State of Christ’s Church’ we pray to the Almighty and everliving God, “Beseeching thee to inspire continually the Universal Church with the spirit of truth, unity and concord, and grant that all those who do confess thy holy Name may agree in the truth of thy holy Word, and live in unity and godly love.” In the prayer the priest prays after or during the *Agnus Dei*, he says, “regard not my sins, but the faith of thy Church; and grant to it that peace and unity which is according to thy will.” In the prayer after communion we thank God “that we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people.” At

Morning Prayer the ‘Prayer for all Conditions of Men’ states, “More especially we pray for thy holy Church universal, that it may be so guided by thy good Spirit, that all who profess and call themselves Christian may be led into the way of truth, and hold the faith in unity of spirit, in the bond of peace, and in righteousness of life.” Some few pages later we have my favorite, the ‘Prayer for the Church,’ the original of which was penned by Archbishop Laud in the seventeenth century and captures that balanced and far reaching vision which he shared with Lancelot Andrewes and others of that era, and which was at the very heart of the spirit that drew me to the Anglican Church. You know the prayer. It goes,

O gracious Father, we humbly beseech thee for thy holy Catholic Church; that thou wouldst be pleased to fill it with all truth, in all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, establish it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of him who died and rose again, and ever liveth to make intercession for us, Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord.

And right beneath that collect is the ‘Prayer for the Unity of God’s People’ with its barbed reminder that gives us the title of today’s sermon. It begins by addressing God with four titles that ought to direct our thoughts toward unity, “O God [one God], the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ [one Father], our only Saviour, the Prince of Peace,” and then it continues, “Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions.” We are apt to think that this is rather overblown rhetoric. Great dangers?

Again this week as last I want to narrow the focus of our thoughts simply to that part of Christ’s one holy, catholic and apostolic Church that is here in south Florida and which claims the orthodox heritage of the Anglican Church. I do so, not to neglect the whole, for which, as has already been made quite clear, we must ever pray, as does our Lord, but as a simple and concrete example, and as a logical starting place for considering the larger issue.

What dangers could we possibly be in by our unhappy divisions? To start with, there is the isolation that we feel, the loneliness that is inevitable when we are so widely scattered both from others in our jurisdiction and from others beyond its pail who struggle to remain faithful in the Anglican tradition. There is also the marginalization

that accompanies our splintering. There is the lack of clear identity. How much confusion (and sometimes embarrassment) is apparent when we try to explain to outsiders the divisions and lack of shared communion with those whose core faith is identical with ours? We suffer when we are separated from, at odds with, and in effect in competition with, one another. Unless we are willing to declare that the other is not a part of the body of Christ, we cannot say by our words or by our actions, “We have no need of you.” We are organically related; we are one in Christ, and are in great danger by our unhappy divisions.

Another way to picture the great dangers we are in is to consider who we are and what our fundamental mission is. The Apostles were sent into the world by the risen Lord to take him and his message to all the nations. Tell me, looking at matters from this perspective, what sense does it make to have a myriad of small churches, each with a building and staff and heavy financial responsibilities (which, of course, are only increasing in these tight times)? Do we not expend almost all of our energies and resources just trying to stay afloat? Looking at it even from a simple business perspective, what kind of a plan is that? Certainly not an effective one. And the picture becomes even more dismal when you consider that with this kind of mixed operation, to put it crassly, we are not presenting a clear picture of the One we would proclaim, but a myriad of oft conflicting variations on the theme. Or to stick with the business model, are we not presenting multiple variations of the same product in different packaging? Or again, is it not like the recent TV commercial where the picture of a house is blurred by various intervening opaque sheets of glass, those being our particular interpretations? How can people see Christ? John Donne focus on this situation in a day when it was far less complex than it is today:

Show me deare Christ, thy spouse so bright and cleare.
 What, is it she, which on the other shore
 Goes richly painted? Or which robbed and tore
 Laments and mournes in Germany and here?
 Sleepes she a thousand, then peepes up one yeare?
 Is she self truth and errs? now new, now outwore?
 Doth she, and did she, and shall she evermore
 On one, on seaven, or on no hill appeare?

George Herbert put it even more starkly in the poem ‘*Churchrents or Schisms*’ in which he addresses Christ as the Rose of Sharon, a title from the Song of Songs:

Brave Rose, alas where art thou? In the chair
 Where thou didst lately so triumph and shine
 A worm doth sit whose many feet and haire
 Art the more foul, the more thou art divine.
 This, this hath done it. This did bite the root
 And bottome of the leaves, which when the wind
 Did once perceive it, blew thee under-foot.
 Where rude unhallowed steps doe crush and grind
 Their beauteous glories. Onely shreads of thee,
 And these all bitten, in thy chair I see.

Was not the focus of the prayer of our Lord on that night of nights for our oneness *that the world might believe*, that they might see clearly in a unified witness by a Church that was united in his love that he is one Son and Savior sent by the Father, and believing come to know the life that is eternal? If by our unhappy divisions we fail, and that miserably, in this our fundamental task are we not in great danger?

Lastly, I would have us consider that the Church is in its most fundamental nature the body of Christ. We know that. In the event we celebrate today our Lord halted a hate-filled Saul on his way to Damascus to imprison Christians with the question, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou *me*?” The body of Christ is *the body of Christ*. The converted Paul addressed to the quarrelling Christians in the church at Corinth the pointed question, “Is Christ divided?” St. Augustine captured the apostle’s understanding when he said simply that Christ the head and the Church, his body, are mystically one, the total Christ, *Totus Christus*. In his words, this image embraces “The whole race of saints, from Abel down to all those who will ever be born and will believe in Christ until the end of the world, for all belong to one city. This city is the body of Christ. . . . *This is the whole Christ: Christ united with the Church.*” The fullness of Christ is in the fullness of his Church. That’s why we need each other as the hand the arm and the ear the eye. If the whole Christ is in the whole Body then to the degree that we cut ourselves off from any part of the body, to that degree do we cut ourselves off from Christ—and that is indeed a great danger, the very greatest. We need each other because we need Christ, and what greater need do we have then him?

There is much, much more that needs to be said to put all of this in perspective. There is not time for that now. There is time, however, for us to listen again, and very carefully, to the remainder of this ‘Prayer for the Unity of God’s People:’

Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions. Take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatsoever else may hinder us from godly union and concord: . . . that as there is but one Body and one Spirit, and one hope of our calling, . . . one Lord [only!], one faith [only!], one baptism [only!], . . . one God and Father of us all, . . . so that we may be all of one heart and of one soul, . . . united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, . . . and may with one mind and one mouth glorify thee, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire on the Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 25, 2009, at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL. Copyright © 2009.