

Third Sunday after Epiphany

January 22, 2012

ONE BREAD, ONE BODY

“For we, being many, are one bread and one body, for we are all partakers of that one bread.”

(I Cor. 10:17)

We will return next week to our reflections on the Gospel according to John, our beloved patron saint, which, for various reasons, we left off six months ago now. Today, however, is the Sunday that falls within the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It is appropriate that this observance, now over a century old and observed almost universally in the Christian Churches, should fall after the celebration of Epiphany, the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, and his Baptism, which inaugurated his public ministry. It is the Gospel according to John that focuses most clearly on the issue of the unity of the Church, and that not only in our Lord's high priestly prayer in John 17. There he prays, of course, for his disciples through the centuries, “That they all may be one, *as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee*” (Jn. 17:21). The unity which he prays for his followers is based on, and is an expression of, that blessed unity of perfect love shared by the Father and the Son. This divine unity is the note on which this Fourth Gospel begins and around which it revolves. The theme is sounded in the opening words which proclaim that the eternal Word whose incarnation is the focus of the gospel was “*with God and was God.*” This implicit claim of unity with the Father is the scandal of his ministry in the eyes of the world. In the passage we will consider next week in the first part of John chapter 5, the furor caused by a miracle of healing on the sabbath leads to Jesus' statement, “My Father worketh hitherto, and I work,” on account of which the Jews seek to kill him because he made himself equal with God, claiming divine prerogatives (Jn. 5:17-18, see ff.). It is that inter-trinitarian unity that was from before the beginning and will be eternally and which was manifested in the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ that is the model for, and source of, the unity of the Church for which Jesus prayed so earnestly on the night before his glorification. The Church is to live from and exhibit that unity in the world as our Lord did in his time upon earth “that the world may believe.”

For his part, St. Paul, as we know, declared in Ephesians that the very essence of the divine purpose in the mystery of the gospel was “that in the dispensation of the fullness of times

he might gather together all things in Christ” (Eph. 1:10). To the Corinthians he proclaimed, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself . . . ; and hath committed unto us the ministry of reconciliation” (II Cor. 5:19). Reconciliation with God and with one another is at the very heart of the gospel, and St. Paul drives home the message of Christian unity in a number of most emphatic and very persuasive ways.

To cite but four of them briefly, he states in Ephesians 4 that there is but *one Lord*. It is interesting that he uses that title at this point. He could have said there is one Christ or one Jesus, but he uses the title that speaks of his rightful ownership of each Christian and of the singular loyalty they owe to him. It also corresponds with the unique monotheistic claim of the Old Covenant. Yahweh says, “I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me.” We all, by the very fact that we name ourselves Christians, acknowledge our absolute loyalty to God in Christ and are therefore bound together in that allegiance.

Second, Paul argues, there is *one faith*, not many. There is *but* one Christian faith which may be formulated somewhat differently by St. John or St. Paul or St. James or St. Peter. It may be celebrated differently in various cultures, but at heart it is the one faith revealed by our Lord and throughout Holy Scriptures, preached by the early Church Fathers and embodied in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. It is the one drama of our redemption revealed in the work of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, resulting in one holy catholic and apostolic Church, the communion of saints, and leading to one blessed hope of eternal life in the kingdom of God.

Third, there is but *one baptism* which inaugurates the believer into the Church, into Christ’s one body, making him a living part thereof and establishing a relationship of mutual dependency with each of the others. Remember that the imagery of baptism is of a dying to self and a rising with Christ. That is seen most vividly when there is a baptism by immersion, an actual lowering of the body into the water as into a grave and a rising up out of it, but the reality carries through to all baptisms. St. Paul wrote to the Romans, “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death that like as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3-4). This dying to sin and self and rising in the life of the one Christ binds us together in him.

One Lord, one faith, one baptism—to this well-known triad, Paul adds another, *one eucharist*. He wrote to the divisive and quarrelling Corinthians, “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body, for we are all partakers of that one bread” (I Cor. 10:16-17).

The early Fathers expounded wonderfully on that apt image of the one and the many in the one loaf of bread. St. John Chrysostom wrote,

The body of Christ is not many bodies, but one body. For just as the bread, which consists of many grains, is made one to the point that the separate grains are no longer visible, even though they are still there, so we are joined to each other and to Christ. But if we are all nourished by the same source and become one with him, why do we not also show forth the same love and become one with him in this respect too? This is what it was like in ancient times, as we see in Acts [4:32]: “For the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul.”

St. Augustine preached to the newly baptized in an Easter sermon,

So by bread you are instructed as to how you are to cherish unity. Was that bread made of one grain of wheat? Were there not, rather, many grains? However, before they became bread, these grains were separate. They were joined together in water after a certain amount of crushing. For unless the grain is ground and moistened with water, it cannot arrive at that form which is called bread. So you too were previously ground, as it were, by the humiliation of your fasting and by the sacrament of exorcism. Then came the baptism of water. You were moistened, as it were, so as to arrive at the form of bread. But without fire, bread does not yet exist.

Immediately before this, Augustine pointed out that when one receives communion the priest says, “The Body of Christ,” and one responds, “Amen.” He then exhorted his hearers, “Be members then of the Body of Christ that your Amen may be true. . . . ‘We being many are one body, one bread.’ Understand and rejoice. Unity, devotion, charity!”

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One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Eucharistic bread. The Church is to be the perfect embodiment of the peace, unity and love that is the direct opposite of that hellish chaos that lies behind creation that we considered last week, and into which humankind is ever in danger of slipping. We are meant to be the hope of the world, or rather that body which, by its reflection

of and witness to the divine loving unity that binds Father, Son and Holy Spirit, directs men and women everywhere to him who is the hope of the world, even Jesus Christ our Lord. When we fail in this most important matter we fail our Lord and we fail the world he came to save.

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on the Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 22, 2012. Copyright © 2012.