

Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

October 16, 2011

“ONE SPIRIT, ONE LORD, ONE GOD”

I will confess to a bit of frustration from time to time with the Sunday Lectionary from the Prayer Book. Oh, it has its advantages in putting before the people the same Epistle and Gospel for each Sunday of the year, year after year, the repetition etching them deeply on our hearts and minds. But it is a very narrow selection of readings when God has imparted to his Church the fullness of his revelation: the manifold richness of all the Epistles and the fourfold portrait of our Lord in the Gospels, to say nothing of the grand sweep of God’s revelation in the Law, the Writings and the Prophets of the Old Testament, without which we cannot truly understand the New, and which we neglect inexcusably. But beyond that, that is apart from all consideration of that which we don’t have, what we do have is all too often is in isolated pericopes, that is short texts without a context. It is often rather like being parachuted into the middle of a jungle somewhere without knowing where you’ve been or where you are going. Beyond that, the context is essential if we are to understand the text.

Today’s Epistle is a case in point. “I, *therefore*,” it begins, and with that ‘therefore’ cries out for all that was written before, which is essential to its point. It’s like calling for a conclusion without setting forth the argument, or asking a judge to render a verdict without the facts of the case. That is one of the reasons why I like preaching in a connected series, and why so many of the Church Fathers, like St. Augustine and St. John Chrysostom, preached through the various books of Scripture in what is called a *lectio continua*, a continuous lectionary. Now, I don’t often get off on personal hobby horses, but this is one.

Today’s Epistle comes at a critical point in St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians. We haven’t time this morning to trace the development of his thought. Suffice it to say that there is a distinct pattern that is followed in most of his epistles, and quite generally by other authors in his day, whereby the basic teaching or doctrine is set forth in the body of an epistle and the application thereof is added in its latter part. We see this most clearly in the apostle’s *magnum opus*, his Epistle to the Romans, wherein he carefully develops his argument through the first 8 chapters of the book, and then, after a parenthesis in chapters 9-11 in which he deals with the question of Israel, he begins the application in chapter 12, the opening verse of which is very

familiar, all the more so since it is quoted in the Canon of the Mass: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.” The “therefore” points back to his careful description of the unfolding of God’s mercy and grace in the earlier part of the book. In the remainder of the book, chapters 12-16, he explains in detail what this means in various concrete situations: in relation to one’s fellow Christians, in relation to the government or the powers that be, in relation to various social interactions, and in one’s own personal ethics.

That is precisely the role that is played in the Letter to the Ephesians by today’s Lesson from the beginning of chapter 4. In chapters 1-3 Paul described the great mystery of redemption manifested to and in the Church, which God chose before the foundation of the world (1:4), for the sake of which he sent his Son “that in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather into one all things in Christ” (1:10), reconciling Jews and Gentiles into one body (2:10-18). Now he calls upon the individual Christians to walk worthy of this their calling, to be the Church, to live in accordance with the great plan of God for the reconciliation of all things: “I *therefore*, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that you walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:1-3). Now we might take this to mean simply that each group of Christians in every place is simply urged to “get along,” or rather to deeply love one another, “to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice,” as he put it to the Romans (12:15). And I must say that you here at Saint John’s show forth that kind of love and embody that kind of peace and unity in the Spirit in a beautiful and remarkable way. You are a gift for which I thank God continually.

But the Epistle does not have in mind a small group of Christians such as ourselves, but rather the whole church in whatever town or city. It easy for us to lose track of this. For us, this church is Church for us, our church, but St. Paul would not have viewed it so. His thinking would be like that of St. Augustine who said in a sermon,

I believe in the holy Church, that holy Church which we are ourselves. In saying ‘we’ I do not mean we who are united here, all who are listening to me now. I mean all the Christians of this local church, those, that is, who live in this city, all the Christians of this region, all the Christians of this province, all the Christians there are beyond the seas, in the whole world, because ‘from the rising of the sun

to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised!’ All these are the Church, our true mother, the true bride of the Bridegroom.

It is with a view to the larger Church in any one location and in all locations that St. Paul continues: “There is one body, and one spirit, even as ye are called in hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (4:4-6). Now this is an exceedingly rich passage, especially when seen in the larger context of this whole Epistle to the Ephesians, but this morning I would direct our attention to one point only, to the observation that St. Paul understands the Church, the concrete church, to be the work, the embodiment, and the manifestation of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He makes explicit reference to all three persons of the Godhead here, but does so notably in the reverse order from that in which they are usually mentioned. He begins with the Holy Spirit, and that because his focus is on the community of the Church, and so he urges us “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:3). The Church is the especial work of the Holy Spirit. In the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds we confess our faith in God the Father Almighty, his only Son Jesus Christ our Lord, and the Holy Spirit, and it is only and immediately after the mention of the Holy Spirit that we speak of “the holy, catholic church.” The Church is the especial work of the Holy Spirit. It is with the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost that we associate the birth of the Church. It is the Holy Spirit that indwells us and moves among us, uniting our hearts in Christian love. So, St. Paul says, “There is one body and *one Spirit*.”

It is only after the mention of the Spirit that the apostle goes on to speak of “*one Lord*, one faith, one baptism.” It is one Lord, even Jesus Christ, into whose body, the Church, we are baptized, participating thereby in his death and resurrection, dying to self and sin, and rising to new and divine life. We are thereby set off from the world and gathered together unto him. The one Lord is the author and finisher of that one faith by which we are made whole, and it is in the confession of faith in the one Lord that we are bound together as one body. The Holy Spirit directs us and draws us to Christ, the one Lord, and enables us to hear and heed his word. This is as the Lord himself promised in the Gospel of John.

Thirdly, St. Paul directs us to “*one God and Father of all*, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (4:6). The Spirit who indwells us unites us with Christ, our head, who is in perfect communion with God and is indeed one with God. (“In the beginning was the Word, and

the Word was *with* God and the Word *was* God.”) And so in the Church we are brought into union and communion with the entirety of the holy Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—or as we have it here, one Spirit, one Lord, one God and Father—who are in personal union and communion with each other. And as if this tri-unity were not already stated clearly enough, St. Paul elaborates his last point by saying that the one God and Father is “above all, and through all and in you all.”

In short, the Holy Trinity is perfect unity, perfect communion, perfect love. And that perfect unity, perfect communion, perfect love is what the apostle urges the churches to embody more and more, to recognize and reflect God’s ultimate purpose to unite all things in Christ. The apostle, therefore urges and pleads most emphatically, “Walk worthy of the calling wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” It is a blessed thing. It is God’s great intention for all. Is it a tall order? Indeed it is, but immediately before the apostle sets this forth at the beginning of Ephesians 4, he concluded chapter 3 with this wonderfully encouraging doxology: “Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.”

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 Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity, October 16, 2011 Copyright © 2011.