

## **“THE FULLNESS OF CHRIST”**

Your Grace, my Lords, Fathers, brothers and sisters in Christ:

Today is marked on our Ordo Kalendar for the Feast of St. Frideswide, Patroness of the city and university of Oxford, who died on this day in the year 735. What we know of St. Frideswide comes chiefly from two accounts not written until four centuries later and conflicting in many details. She was born on an uncertain date midway though the preceding century, the daughter of Didan, a minor Anglo-Saxon king, founded a priory while still young and, given her vows, refused her hand in marriage to Algar, a Mercian king, who, refusing to take ‘No’ for an answer, subsequently sought to abduct her. Beyond that, the picture is fuzzy. In one account, she flees to Oxford and from thence to Bampton on a ship sent by God, while Algar, searching for her in Oxford, is struck blind. In another account, Algar is in hot pursuit but falls off his horse just outside the gates of Oxford and breaks his neck. All these centuries later, even through the fog of uncertainty, we behold a woman who as a nun was an icon of the Church, a worthy picture of faithful Bride of Christ, untouchable by the wooing and even strong-arm tactics of the world, faithful and fruitful in her life and in her death.

What we know of her after her death is more historically reliable than what we know of her before and tells us a great deal about the subsequent history of the English Church. St. Frideswide’s priory became an Augustinian monastery in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, was suppressed by Cardinal Wolsey early in the 16<sup>th</sup> and, as a part of his grand design, turned into what became Christ Church College, Oxford. In 1546 King Henry VIII made her church the cathedral of the new Diocese of Oxford. The fate of her relics was even more turbulent. They were translated twice in the Middle Ages and became a place of pilgrimage until despoiled by King Henry in 1538. Her festival was abolished in 1549, the year the first Prayer Book was published, and in 1561 her remains were mixed with those of the wife of Peter Martyr Vermigli. Now I know Vermigli is no more a household name than Frideswide. Suffice it to say that he was an Italian churchman who was influenced first by the Catholic reformer, Savonorola, and then by the Protestant reformers, Bucer and Zwingli, was brought to Oxford by Thomas Cranmer and made Regius Professor of Divinity in 1548, took part in the great disputation on the Eucharist the

following year, and heavily influenced the 1552 revision of the *Book of Common Prayer* in which, it was claimed, “all traces of the old Mass were swept away, along with every prayer or rubric which indicated a belief in the Real Presence.” The remains of Peter Martyr’s wife were mingled with those of St. Frideswide by James Calhill, a leading Elizabethan Calvinist, and buried at the north-east end of the cathedral, causing the acerbic Roman Catholic polemicist, Nicholas Sander, to remark, “Here lies religion with superstition.” James Calhill, the mixer, might well have agreed with that remark, but with a switching of the subjects.

Now history is messy business, and the history of the Church is messy business. We surely are happy with neither the callous meanness of the deed nor the blind prejudice of the remark, but it seems to me that this commingling of the remains of the Roman Catholic nun and the wife of the Protestant reformer presents a vivid picture of the religious conflicts of the age, in the shadow of which we still live, and symbolizes something of both the genius and problems of Anglicanism. We have sought to be a middle way between the extremes of Roman Catholicism on the one hand and Protestantism on the other. We revere the traditional faith and practice of the ancient and medieval Church, which is our Mother and with which we are one, *and* we seek ever anew to “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest” the holy Scriptures, which, in the words of *The Affirmation of St. Louis*, we own to be “the authentic record of God’s revelation of himself, . . . valid for all men and all time.” It is within the tension between these two polarities (which may be pictured for simplicity’s sake as the positions of the first *Book of Common Prayer* and the second, the 1549 and the 1552) that we can trace the varying points on the spectrum that encompasses the several, or rather more, denominations that make up the alphabet soup of Anglicanism today, each drawing its own line in the sand. St. Frideswide’s day is thus, inadvertently, a reminder to us of the “unhappy divisions” that separate us from one another, to say nothing of the Dissenters, and of the great gulf that separates us from the Church of Rome.

We who know this messy history all-too-well can easily understand how George Herbert would write of Holy Church in his poem, “Church-rents and Schismes”:

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 hair  
 Are the more foul, the more thou wert divine. . . .

Christ's precious blood Gave you colour once; . . .  
 But when debates and fretting jealousies  
 Did worm and work within you more and more,  
 Your colour vaded, and calamities  
 Turned your ruddie into pale and bleak;  
 Your health and beautie both began to break.

O Mother, deare and kinde,  
 Where shall I get me eyes enough to weep,  
 As many eyes as starres? since it is night . . .

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I think it a bold and admirable thing that at this present time, in the context of recent events both among continuing Anglicans, so called, and on the part of the Church of Rome, the Anglican Catholic Church, now gathered in Provincial Synod, should dedicate its principle Mass to that deepest intention of our Lord for the unity of his holy Church, and, in consequence, should direct our attention to two of the strongest and clearest texts that remind us this is not the way it's supposed to be.

The one, from our Lord's High Priestly prayer on the eve of his glorification, is perhaps least in need of exposition. We know it well. It is perhaps too familiar. He prays for his disciples both present and those yet to be, "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (Jn. 17:21). The unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is not merely a model for Christian unity, an unattainable goal, it is rather of its very essence. The two are inextricably bound together, though in a manner which surely remains a mystery: "I in them and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one" (17:23). This unity is not an end in itself, however. It is for the sake of the world. The context of the prayer is the imminent physical absence from the world of our Lord now that he had finished the work the Father gave him to do (17:4). It is now up to the Church to so preserve, embody and manifest the divine unity that the world may know that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, uniting God and man.

The focus and object of the incarnation is summed up nowhere better than in the words spoken to Nicodemus, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son," so it comes as something of a surprise that in this high priestly prayer we hear our Lord say quite explicitly, "I pray not for the world" (17:9). It is not, however, that the focus and object of divine love has

changed, but rather that it is now the Church rather than the Son that is sent into the world. “As thou hast sent me into the world, *even so* have I sent them into the world” (17:18). And as our Lord manifested his oneness with the Father and the Father’s with him, even so are we to reveal that divine loving unity in us and through us to the end, as Jesus prays to the Father, “that the world may know that thou hast sent me” (17:23).

We now turn from the last of the Gospels to the last of the Epistles of St. Paul, and as we do so we turn from the profound simplicity of the beloved disciple to the profound complexity of the apostle born out of time. The ethereal world of the Epistle to the Ephesians is such as to cause many to seek another author, but if not St. Paul who? A greater than he, who left no other trace of his existence? I doubt it. But the Epistle is different and difficult. Marcus Barth called it, “the stranger at the door.” E.J. Goodspeed called it both “the Waterloo of commentators” and “a great rhapsody of salvation.” There is something about the last Gospel and the last Pauline Epistle that reflects the profundity of prolonged contemplation upon the mystery of faith decade after decade, contemplation that seems to center more and more on the idea of reconciliation, oneness, unity.

In the Epistle to the Ephesians we are transported at once into the heavenlies, to the highest spiritual heights. St. Paul declares that God has now “made known to us the mystery of his will, according to the good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: that in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might *gather together all things in Christ*, both which are in heaven and which are in earth, even in him” (Eph. 1:9-10). Like St. John, St. Paul has reached back before the beginning, before the creation of heaven and earth. John says, “In the beginning *was . . .*”; Paul speaks of “before the foundation of the world” (1:4). Both seek to describe in the flimsy medium of human words the overreaching purpose of God before all time and unto its end, and this purpose finds its climax, according to Paul, in the Church of Jesus Christ, which is “his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all” (1:23). Christ is the fullness, the completion and completeness of creation, and he fills *and is filled by* (don’t ask me to explain it) *the Church*.

After describing how this grand design has already begun to be worked out in the gospel of saving grace and in the uniting of Jew and Gentile in Christ (“For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall between us” (2:14)), the apostle moves to his conclusion in this encyclical to the various churches in Asia Minor: “I, therefore, a prisoner

of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthily of the vocation to which you are called (the fulfilling of the divine purpose just outlined), with all lowliness, meekness, longsuffering, forbearance, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:1-3). Why? Because there is but “one body, one Spirit, one hope of your calling, one Lord (that is the fundamental Christian confession), one faith (of which he is the author and finisher), one baptism (which incorporates us into him), one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in you all” (4:4-6). The terms are absolutely correlative: one Lord, one faith, one baptism, case closed. The one Church is bound by these parameters.

But the unity that is already given and so eloquently stated, must paradoxically be pursued, maintained, and achieved. It is both a given and a goal. Christ’s uniting of all things in heaven and earth is accomplished; the victory is complete. And yet it must be prayed for and fought for. The enemy is vanquished, but we must put on the armour of God and wrestle with principalities and powers. The decisive battle is won, the struggle remains. This theology was taken up and worked out in great detail in the next century by various Church Fathers, but above all by Irenaeus with his doctrine of recapitulation whereby he understood that God in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ rectifies, completes and perfects the great design for creation, restores the image and likeness of God that we lost in Adam, and reunites all things under Christ the head, a new creation. This he does in the ongoing life of the Church, restoring the unity and harmony that was destroyed as soon as sin entered into the world. It is in and through the life of the Church, even in and through the messiness of its history that the design of God unfolds. At the height of the Oxford Movement, in the 87<sup>th</sup> of *The Tracts for the Times* Isaac Williams looked back upon those tumultuous years in the reign of King Edward VI that saw the birth of the *Book of Common Prayer* and observed that the divine providence does not usually direct his Church along a straight line by a unanimous voice, but rather seems to support at one time those on the more catholic side, and then those on the opposite, but directing it all through a kind of dialectic of the Spirit to his greater end. Now those are my words, not his. What he said was that there was “a providential power, now converting and then controlling; now amalgamating, then neutralizing; in short, either by maturing or by frustrating the thoughts of men, [that] has throughout, so far as we can discern, made all things to work to one great end.”

The Church of Jesus Christ has one great end and purpose set forth clearly in the Epistle and Gospel we have heard. Now we cannot escape the messiness of history. We all are where we are at different places along the Christian spectrum for various reasons, some understandable and admirable, others not so, but it is not the case, contrary to some, that any one of the greater Churches, Roman, Anglican or Orthodox, has the whole truth of God. That is found rather in the whole, and in Christ the Head. Nor can we settle for a branch theory, for the Church is not a tree but a body, and besides, branches naturally produce smaller branches, and finally twigs. No, there is one body within the parameters St. Paul has clearly enumerated, and each part of the body stands in need of the other. None of us sees truth whole and therefore we cannot exist by ourselves. We need to know one another and listen to one another and talk to one another and learn from one another. Cardinal Mercier, who presided over the important Anglican/Roman Catholic conversations at Malines in the 1920s, put it simply, “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.”

It is a great conversation that we need and one that seeks to encompass not a *via media* only but the whole Church. We cannot be whole without the whole. We need a conversation where no party dictates to the others or dominates the talks, a dialogue such as that described in *Gaudium et Spes: The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, “which can lead to truth through love alone [and] excludes no one,” a give and take where the truth each of us possesses in part, seeing through a glass darkly, is illumined by the perspective of the other. The New Testament does not speak to us with a single unified voice. It is a chorus that we hear there, and it were a great loss had we not the voices of both St. John and St. Paul, not to mention all of the others.

Even so, the voice of each Church has something important to contribute, and quite certainly the Anglican. We bring the wide embrace of Lancelot Andrewes, who always prayed earnestly for the whole of the Catholic Church: Eastern, Western and our own. We bring the wisdom and balance of William Laud, who prayed for the filling of the whole Church with truth and peace, for the purifying of corruption, the directing of error, the reforming of anything that is amiss. We echo Jeremy Taylor’s warning not to make every opinion a dogma. We endorse E.B. Pusey’s prayerful hope regarding his Church and that of Rome that “As each, by God’s grace,

grows in holiness, each Church will recognize, more and more, the Presence of God's Holy Spirit in the other; and what now hinders the union of the Western Church will fall off."

None of us possesses the fullness of truth, the fullness of Christ who is truth. We know in part, but we do not yet know as we are known. We are on the way, on a journey. And St. Paul pictures the dynamic inner-working of the of the Church as it makes its way with the leadership of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor/teachers, *each* contributing to the perfecting of the saints and the building up of the body. But he also pictures the goal of our pilgrimage, the time when we shall meet our Lord in all his glory, but the language here is notoriously difficult, for St. Paul is describing that which is beyond knowledge. But he says we will continue on our journey "till we all come in the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the statue of the fullness of Christ," . . . "unto the measure of the statue of the fullness of Christ." Until then, we must seek to let him who could unite Jew and Gentile, breaking down the middle wall of partition, do his work among us as well.

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Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Pontifical Mass for Christian Unity of the XIX Provincial Synod of the Original Province of the Anglican Catholic Church, held at the Holy Guardian Angels Anglican Catholic Church, Lantana, FL, on October 19, 2011. Copyright © 2011.

