

A sermon on Christian Unity at Highfield Road, Surrey Hills in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, E7A 21 May 2023

Isa. 1: 12-18, Acts 1: 1-6, Jn 17: 1-11

We meet on the first Sunday of the World Council of Churches' Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, a day we also share with the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox churches across the world. We thank God for the work of your own Canterbury Council of Churches, and it is a sign of unity that we have Mr Denis Fitzgerald leading our intercessions and that our Orthodox neighbours have lent us two ikons, their unique expression of faith and prayer.

Today's Gospel is indeed a plea from the lips of Jesus that his future disciples should be one – not just getting along, not just enjoying some friendly fellowship, not just borrowing a bit of each other's liturgy or spirituality, but in a unity which is modelled on that between God the Father and God the Son, promised and fulfilled by the promised Holy Spirit. That is quite an aim for us scattered Christians.

When I read today's readings over in the light of that thought, I noticed something I had not seen before. Each of them has been used to divide Christians – by Christians. But they have been chosen for this day of prayer for *Christian Unity*!

I.

Take the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, **Isaiah's** ringing denunciation of false worship.

<sup>14</sup> Your new moons and your appointed festivals  
my soul hates;  
they have become a burden to me,  
I am weary of bearing them.  
<sup>15</sup> When you stretch out your hands,  
I will hide my eyes from you;  
even though you make many prayers,  
I will not listen;  
<sup>17</sup> Learn to do good;  
seek justice,  
rescue the oppressed,  
defend the orphan,  
plead for the widow.

In and after the 16<sup>th</sup> C Reformation, such texts were the trigger for the destruction of some of the most exquisite art produced by human hands

and a legacy for humankind was lost in the smashing of statues, of stained-glass windows, the burning of altars and church furniture, of paintings and vestments, not to mention the martyrs on both sides.

It led some Protestants to the rejection of a 'Christian (or Liturgical) year' with its festivals and its ordinary days - in my youth, we had no Lent or Advent, and a one-day Easter. But by recovering its use across the churches, we have found a spiritual pattern which leads us on a journey through the mighty acts of God for our salvation, a calendar by which we live a faithful life alongside the secular calendar and its caricatures of religion. With the *Common Lectionary*, English-speaking Christians mostly hear the same readings every week.

One unique fact about the **Orthodox** Churches: they have never had a reformation. But they too had a dispute over the worship of idols. The question was: can things seen with the eye depict the things of God as the words of Scripture tell us the thoughts of God? There were Eastern Christians who objected to this and began to burn the ikons already in their churches as the western churches did.

They held a Council, a second one at Nicaea, in 787 CE, which said, yes, one of the Ten Commandments condemns idolatry, but in the incarnation, God has taken *human* form and lived among us, the true *ikon* - image - of God. (The word has been stolen from the Church by commercialism and hero worship.) The natural world itself was sanctified by his coming. So we have here the two ikons from our Romanian Orthodox friends, perhaps the most precious things in their tradition which they could have shared with us.

## II.

Now, look at the story of the **Ascension**, which Luke tells twice, at the end of the Gospel and the beginning of Acts. For him, it is a pivotal point in the life of Jesus and the Church. The New Testament writers have different ways of expressing this moment, which indeed challenges our comprehension.

St John rolls the crucifixion, resurrection and glory into one magnificent ikon! Luke and Matthew started that rather literalistic image (seen in some church windows) of two feet disappearing into a cloud.

Their earliest readers would have understood it differently: here is their beloved God-with-us returning to his heavenly community of the Holy Trinity, carrying the promise that he was preparing a place for them to join him. In terms of the physical Jesus, the important thing is that now, in the Presence of the Father, Christ's body still bears the marks of the Cross.

So, the One they knew as the man Jesus is not with them as he had been.

In 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, there occurred a dispute as to where the *body of Jesus was*. In the Middle Ages, the best philosophical minds had turned to this and located the body of Jesus to be truly in the bread and wine at the eucharist. It remains Catholic doctrine.

Martin Luther barely moved from that position but refused to tie down such a mystery. He used to say that Christ's body at Communion was received 'in, with and under' the sacred elements.

According to Calvin, Christ's human body is indeed present in heaven, but it does not have to descend in order for believers to partake of it, because the Holy Spirit truly makes the true communion. The Holy Spirit is the bond of the believer's union with Christ.

Now, a great deal more can be said about this! Of course, Jesus is not 'absent' from us; he is present in many ways including in this very gathering of the People of God, in the Ministry of the Word, in our praying and in our service of others. (One of the most eloquent statements of this can be found in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.) <sup>1</sup>

I simply want to note that today's Ascension theme was used for antagonism and division – and I can assure you that our ecumenical dialogues with each other have brought us very much closer to agreement, if mysteries must be defined.<sup>2</sup>

III.

So, to the Gospel - the Last Prayer of Jesus before the Cross, and its promise of the Holy Spirit. Its message is unmistakable and seems observed mainly in the breach.

Here is the image of Christ in glory to which our prayers and worship have been addressed.

*<sup>11</sup> I am no longer in the world, but they (his followers) are still in the world, but I am coming to you.*

*Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you have given me, that they may be one, as we are one. (REB)*

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<sup>1</sup> (Vatican II) Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium 7 & 8, 1962)

<sup>2</sup> The dialogue between the World Methodist Council and the Vatican to 2010 is summarized in Synthesis, Together in Holiness, see <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/consiglio-metodista-mondiale/other-documents-and-events/together-to-holiness---40-years-of-methodist-roman-catholic-dial.html>

