

## Sermon Notes for Trinity XVII

*“there is one body and one spirit” (epistle)*

Some people imagine that members of Continuing bodies spend all their time devising new arguments against the ordination of women. In fact we hardly ever mention the topic. Similarly, I am sure evangelicals do not spend all their time producing new arguments against same-sex “marriages”. But neither of us can avoid the much more basic problem – what is the Church and are we part of it?

The term “visible” is much used in this context, but is not scriptural. One might ask in what sense the National Trust is visible. It has members, and a membership list as at a particular date has to be produced for the purpose of voting. But we will never *see* its members assembled together. Yet it is a body, not just a legal device. But visible mainly in its works.

Now the term “visible” is in the 39 Articles. “The visible church is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered . . .” (Article 19) In some way, then, we can find it by looking (if we know what to look for!) Contrast the “invisible church”, which is neither scriptural nor in the Articles. That is a term derived (perhaps wrongly) from Augustine by some protestants to express 'those who God knows will be saved' (they are wrong, for where is the proof that God *exercises* that omniscience which he has?) But we are rightly led to expect that there should be a visible body with (in some measure, for we are all imperfect) these attributes. And our complaint against the Church of England is that it fails on these tests.

Nobody imagines we can assemble that whole body together. That was not true even in St. Paul's day. We can tell, from the very small number martyred with Justin Martyr, that the church in Rome had a cellular structure; while as a matter of instinct the early church wanted one congregation under one bishop in each town (and that is what St. Paul or rather his immediate successors set up and would not allow to divide under any pretext), it was not always possible.

What then is the “oneness” of the church? One body, spirit, Lord, faith, baptism, God, says the Epistle. Not one set of canon law under a central authority, nor one liturgy universally imposed. Still less any “establishment”. The Church of England did not (we thought in its better days) cease to be part of the Church by its break with Rome, but equally we in our turn might remain part of the Church after our break with the Church of England. In both cases there is an obligation of charity, of course. We should endeavour “to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace”. But in both cases there was an accumulation of error such that we thought separation unavoidable. It *might* indeed be a charitable witness.

“By their fruits ye shall know them”. The Church of England never managed to *consist* of “faithful men” (coetus credentium in the Latin, serious Christians, shall we say) though it never lacked some such. In its early years there was little preaching. Nor was the Holy Communion much available (assuming that what little was done was “duly administered”). Baptism was, however, always adequately provided. Eventually matters improved, for a time. I am reluctant to assess its present state, having these many years left it, but the reports we all hear are of division, widespread error practised and taught, innumerable forms of degraded liturgy.

What of ourselves? We aspire to maintain what we can in the terms of the Article, when others have abandoned it. It is hard work, to “walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called”, but no other way is of any value.

Not as if we alone conform to the definition. We have to try to recognise others of that one calling and to seek to be one with them. That is why the TAC in this country has been in talks with other bodies, as have our brethren in the USA. I am not yet fully convinced that the proper end of such talks is one jurisdiction; I am certain that “endeavouring to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace” is much more than a loose, indifferent friendship. It does involve mutual discipline.

God's demands (for fruits) are strenuous. The saddest truth of the Church of England was that it always had a large adherence of the half-hearted, and had little choice but to acquiesce in their lukewarm acceptance of a broad way. And yet some were by God's mercy brought to salvation within it. We aspire to offer the narrow way because it alone is Christ's; "few there be that find it", and we will always doubt even of ourselves. And we are few indeed, and tired. Yet that is the only Christian calling, the way in which we ought to walk.

The great list of singular attributes which I recalled earlier is in fact our hope. For God is one, and these attributes are not signs of human achievement but of His work in us. We do not struggle to achieve these attributes and so become worthy of God's attention; rather, they are his gifts to his undeserving Church to give it the life which it so badly needs. But we have to receive them.