

Sermon Notes for Trinity XVII

“one body and one Spirit” (Epistle)

The early Church assumed that the Spirit was active within the One Church *and probably not elsewhere* – the mission of the Son was indeed to all mankind but that of the Spirit only among the gathered and organised faithful. And this is the view of the Prayer Book catechism; the Son's work of redemption is “for all mankind”, and therefore extends to the conversion of unbelievers, but the Spirit's work is to sanctify only “me and all the elect people of God”.

Now the reformers were so convinced of the individual working of God on the soul that they tended to avoid thinking that there was any working through the Church. Yet the Epistle does not separate the “one body” from any of the other fundamental (because part of the work of the “one God and Father of us all”) matters of our vocation which are mentioned in it. “One body” is not optional.

Now the standard protestant view of the “one body” is that it cannot be tangible; there is only the visible (but not essential to salvation) individual congregation and the invisible unity of those who are actually saved, who are known only to God. Generally it is accepted that an elect Christian should take on membership of a congregation (yet more for efficiency's sake than because this is part of the order of salvation). This is (at some removes) the doctrine of Wycliffe.

The Church of England is a special case, because it once was a highly visible state (national) body to which, as a matter of obedience to the divinely ordained King, all his subjects ought to belong. This self-understanding has been false for some three hundred years, but it dies hard. The attempt to require such membership was abandoned by William III and it will not be restored.

It is not for British subjects to be more monarchist than successive monarchs. The only reason anybody should belong to the Church of England is because it is either the whole of the “one body” or at least an integral part of it.

“I know that all save England's church have shammed
And that the other twice two hundred churches
And synagogues have made a damned bad purchase.”

So Byron, and he couldn't believe it. *I don't think anybody else does or should either*. Even if there was a time when the Church of England seemed to be both united and more clearly fashioned after the Gospel requirements than any other body (which was the view of George Herbert just before its destruction!), now Anglicanism is not united or a clearly Gospel body. Some part of it might imagine, not that it was the “one body”, but that it was still a part of it. We have all become much more aware of the rest of the Christian world, and how small even the whole of Anglicanism would be even if it were united, let alone our small part of it. Yet no undoubtedly Catholic body views *any* part of Anglicanism even as a part of the whole. Are they all wrong?

Have the Orthodox forsaken the Gospel, and if so (given that they have changed so little over so many centuries) when? Was the Catholic Church of the West as it was before the present pope (not now, or as it was thought to be in the sixteenth century) under that condemnation? Who would dare say that any portion of the Continuum is markedly superior to the great churches?

But has God failed to preserve the “one body”? God forbid. I think we are bound to respect the consensus of the great churches so far as it exists. Remember that both East and West accept each other's orders and sacraments – and that all deny the validity of Anglican orders and sacraments (other than baptism). Lambeth Anglicanism has certainly forsaken their consensus. It respects neither the authority of the Pope (though at present this may seem prudent!) nor the authority of the undoubted Bishops collectively (which is the other early implementation of those promises). The same is true of GAFCON Anglicanism, if with less departure from Christian moral teaching.

So we are in a mess. That cannot change our duty to God, of course. Pray for the Bishops of the Continuum, who have a duty actively to seek unity. Aspire to the One Church, not forsaking any of its undoubted teaching and practice. Persist in what we have; for God is merciful to the imperfections of our response to him.