

Trinity 2 01-06-08

“I believe one holy catholic and apostolic church” (creed).

We can never avoid studying this clause. The first point comes from last Sunday's epistle; if you do not love your brother, whom you have seen, how can you love God? This is meant as much of your brother in the church as of natural brothers. There never was an “invisible” church. The underlying Greek is a good secular word meaning “assembly” - what happens when the whole citizen population of a state *meets together as an organised body*. The underlying Hebrew has the same implication, except that the assembly is called by God and meets under his authority. This is a highly visible process and so are the failings to love the brother within it!

So when we speak of one church, it is found (at least) when we meet together, as now; yet also in much larger meetings together (even synods!) which have to be representative, and so right up to assemblies of the whole church, such as were the Ecumenical Councils in the past, to whose decisions we are bound.

One church does not mean one bureaucracy, or the absolute necessity of one earthly visible head (which may or may not be suggested in Matthew 16.18 – the early church was not sure about it). What it does mean is that all the inevitably physically separate groups of Christians have a clear duty to think and to act together. So in the early church, when each congregation had its own bishop, though the congregation chose that bishop, it was for neighbouring bishops to agree that choice and consecrate the candidate, or to require a fresh choice. Bishops were at pains to consult each other, lest they fall into false teaching or unwise practical decisions. Ordinary lay people when they travelled brought with them letters from their bishop confirming their Christian status.

Maybe this sounds rather humdrum, not very exciting, but it worked well. In practice, some churches either because of outstanding bishops or demonstrable theological knowledge came to be trusted as sources of advice and correction. The practical position of the Pope and the skills maintained in the Vatican (as opposed to theories of infallibility which seem not to lead anywhere) owes more to this experience than to the (alleged) promise to St. Peter.

Unity is a practical matter, not fine words but routine, humble, loving deeds. Its basis is in God's unity, which is to be worked out in our own (see John 17.21).

A particular mistake (made by Henry VIII and various protestant rulers, and also more recently in some Orthodox jurisdictions) is to try to identify church and nation. At worst, this produces the church as nationalised industry, serving man not God, or the church as legitimising (and expressing) myths of ethnicity. God's church from its very beginning at Whitsun has ideally embraced “every nation under heaven” in one body, and has not regarded national boundaries as significant. This is not to say that God has no interest in nations; merely that he does not treat them as permanent entities and does not call on us to reflect them in our life as the Church of God. It is probably a blessing that “established” national churches have almost disappeared from the world – they survive only in England and Scandinavia, and most Anglican bodies have never been in this situation.

At one level, the smallest church is complete (at least when it meets under its bishop). So is the smallest group of congregations. But no church, no group of congregations, nor even a large body such as Anglicanism or Orthodoxy, should imagine itself to be self-sufficient. That is a sin against the brethren. I believe that sin was committed in this country under Henry VIII and renewed under Elisabeth I. Henry did not allege the need for reformation as his pretext, merely a right to isolation. By the time of Elisabeth there was more belief that reform was needed, though little was achieved. It can fairly be argued that, by fits and starts, Anglicanism (as it slowly developed) recognised its duty to be one with the rest of God's church. Serious efforts at negotiations with Rome were begun, but then negated by a renewed isolationism, a belief that individual Anglican jurisdictions could decide important matters for themselves without reference to the wider church.

We believe that it is our duty to “love one another as he gave us commandment” and so seek one church, a duty which has been acknowledged in our foundation documents. There are all sorts of human reasons why the search may fail; but better fail doing our duty to God than evade that duty.

The Epistle 1 John 3.13-24 is relevant.