

Sermon for Morning Prayer Ascension Day

I. Lessons:ⁱ

A. The First Lesson: Here beginneth the ninth Verse of the seventh Chapter of the Book of Daniel.ⁱⁱ

“I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire. A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him: thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him: the judgment was set, and the books were opened. ... I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

B. The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians.ⁱⁱⁱ

“I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that

he might fill all things.) And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

II. Text:

From the Second Lesson: “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”^{iv}
In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.

III. Introduction and Theme:

If you are hearing or reading this sermon, then you are almost certainly a person who regularly worships according to one or another of the traditional editions of the Book of Common Prayer that, for more than 460 years, has been such a defining characteristic of Anglicanism. And if you regularly worship according to the authentic Book of Common Prayer, then by the rule of *lex orandi, lex credendi*—that is, “What you pray becomes what you believe”—you are very probably committed to the maintenance of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic

Faith—the Faith of the three historic Creeds and of the ancient universal, undivided Church of the Apostles—in its distinctively Anglican expression.

But if you are the sort of classic Catholic with an Anglican orientation who I have just described, you are likely confused and concerned by the multiplicity of self-described “traditional” or “conservative” communions, jurisdictions, denominations, and bodies that present such a patchwork appearance to any interested observer. You may even be one of those who has, on occasion, been heard to lament, “Why cannot all those, who believe and practice the same things, unify themselves, so as to witness more effectively to the world?”

IV. Development:

Nearly everyone who is concerned with this issue has encountered the host of initials and acronyms for the various Anglican, neo-Anglican, or quasi-Anglican church and para-church bodies and associations. A typical string such as ACA,^v ACC,^{vi} ACNA,^{vii} AMiA,^{viii} APA,^{ix} APCK,^x CANA,^{xi} DHC,^{xii} EMC,^{xiii} FACA,^{xiv} FiF,^{xv} REC,^{xvi} TAC,^{xvii} or UECNA^{xviii}—all of which stand for current names and not even any of the many past labels or groups which have disappeared. Further, all of these I just read are relatively mainstream rather than just some of the horde of fringe groups—speedily shows why some complain of an “alphabet soup” of church entities, both within and without the Archbishop of Canterbury’s old Lambeth association of churches. (That Lambeth association is what we used to call “the Anglican Communion”, until some of its most prominent members began jettisoning essentials that have always marked Anglicanism as Catholic in the ancient sense.)

When coming to grips with this apparent disunity and disorder, the first thing we must recognize is that all of those who assume the label “Anglican”, even all those whose worship uses some traditional version of the Book of Common Prayer, do *not* in fact share the same beliefs and practices.

If you doubt that, just ask two questions and tabulate for yourself the answers given you by members of these different groups. The first of these shibboleths^{xix} is, “What authority do the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion have within your jurisdiction?” The second is, “What does your group teach about the nature and operation of the Sacraments? How many are there, and are they subjective or objective channels of Grace?”

Then, too, this seemingly hopeless confusion in the “Continuing Anglican” scene is just a subset of the larger mixture, seemingly a random olio, of communions, jurisdictions, denominations, and groups that litter the field of Christianity in general. Non-Christians—and many Christians, also—are constantly amazed at the number and variety of Christian organizations, many of which are usually squabbling with some of the others or even with almost all of the others.

Of course, those who marvel and despair at this apparent Christian confusion conveniently forget the uneasy and often hostile relations between the four or five major movements within Islam, the two or three distinct streams of Buddhism, the several factions within Hinduism, or the four principal parties and numerous minor sects within Judaism.

The result of this myopic perspective is, all too often, an ill-considered call for “unity”, at any price and upon any terms, whether that unity be conceived on the macro scale as the merger of disparate Christian groups, as in the Churches of South India and of North India, or on the micro scale as the merger of disparate Anglican groups. In either case, these proposals are floated without adequate provision for the real historic reasons that have led to those prospective merger partners’ separate existences.

Equally, such conceptualized mergers, whether macro-scale pan-Christian ones or micro-scale pan-Anglican ones, also overlook the very real and substantive degree of unity that already exists despite the formal distinctions between church corporations or juridical entities. As St. Paul reminded the Ephesians in today’s Second Lesson, they were, and we are, called to be “[E]ager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one

baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all, and through all, and in all.”^{xx} Baptism, of course, incorporates each of us into the body of Christ, thus uniting us in a fundamental way with all Christians, even with those who do not themselves believe that Baptism is anything more than a simple sign or mere memorial.

To borrow a phrase that is often used by some with whom we do not agree upon the basics of the Faith, this passage sets forth seven “instruments of unity” among Christians:

A. We, who are dedicated to Christ in Baptism, are all one Body.

This profound truth, that has been taught by mainstream Christianity ever since it was first enunciated by St. Paul,^{xxi} is emphasized by the title of a wonderful old introductory text on the Catholic faith: YE ARE THE BODY by Bonnell Spencer.^{xxii} But if we Christians all form what is in God’s eyes one body, then we already share a very real unity, despite any institutional or administrative diversity.

B. We, as Christians, are enlivened and guided by one Holy Spirit.

All orthodox Christians—that is, “orthodox” with a lower case “o”—are baptized into the Church “in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”.^{xxiii} And notice that familiar phrase refers to the *Name*, singular, of the Persons of the Trinity, not to their *Names*, plural.

It is the Third Person of that Trinity, God the Holy Spirit, Who acts in that Sacrament and makes us members of Christ,^{xxiv} even when the celebrant of that Baptism does not accurately understand what the Church has always done in that Sacrament.^{xxv} Further, Our Lord promised us, and the Church has always believed, that it is the Holy Spirit Who enlivens^{xxvi} and guides^{xxvii} the Church^{xxviii} so as to keep it from all essential error.

Thus, as St. Paul reminds the Ephesians, all who have received the Holy Spirit in Baptism, and who are incorporated into that Church which the Holy Spirit invigorates and watches over, already share among themselves a very essential form of unity.

C. We Christians hold fast to one hope of eternal salvation.

Several noticeable characteristics mark Christians off as different from the rest of humanity. Of these, one of the principal ones is their hope that, with the Lord's help, they will surmount death^{xxxix} and be resurrected^{xxx} in their bodies.^{xxxix} Pagans and unbelievers have no such hope, or any other defense against the pains and disappointments of this uncertain physical life.

Thus it is that the two most ethical and admirable of the ancient pagan philosophical systems, Stoicism and Epicureanism, could offer their adherents nothing better than the advice to avoid pain and disappointment, essentially by withdrawing themselves from most forms of social and political engagement. Thus, too, it is that St. Peter exhorts us to "Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you...."^{xxxii}

In contrast, as Christians, we share the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection, something that distinguishes us from the non-Christian world so sharply that it effectively unifies all who possess it.

D. We Christians acknowledge one Lord over us and over His Church.

Scripture attests to the Lordship of the Second Person of the Trinity, God the Son, Jesus Christ, over the world,^{xxxiii} over His Church,^{xxxiv} and, therefore, over us who are the members of that Church.^{xxxv} Furthermore, we acknowledge that Lordship each time we recite one of the three historic Creeds of the Church.

And where all Christians acknowledge that they are the subjects of the same Lord, who can reasonably deny that they are united in that allegiance?

E. We Christians adhere to the basic principles of one Faith.

We have already mentioned the three historic statements of the Faith of the Church, the Nicene, Apostles', and Athanasian Creeds. Historically, the entire Church, both East and West, adhered to the Nicene Creed and the entire Western Church adhered to the Apostles' and Athanasian Creeds as well. The entire Household of the Faith – the Catholic Church to which those Creeds refer – has always deemed them to be sufficient statements of the minimal beliefs that a faithful Christian must hold.

But if all Christians must believe, at bottom, the same essential things, then we are already united in the bases of our Faith and beliefs, however much we may differ on some of the minor details of that Faith or in our practices.

F. We Christians are incorporated into Our Lord's Body through one Baptism.

Previously, we mentioned that the Holy Spirit is the One who acts in the Sacrament of Baptism.^{xxxvi} There is only one valid form of Baptism, that where either the baptizand is immersed in water or water is poured over the baptizand, while the celebrant pronounces that the subject is being baptized in the Name—again, that is the *Name* singular—of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost—or Holy Spirit.^{xxxvii}

While some Christians have departed from the traditional understanding of what Baptism means, or of how essential it is to the Christian life, none disputes that this, and this alone, is what the Church has always recognized as this Sacrament.

Where all Christians thus share this one unmistakable rite of entrance into our Faith, we also share unity on this essential point.

G. We Christians acknowledge the sovereignty of one God and Father of us all.

Scripture attests to the Fatherhood of the First Person of the Trinity, God the Father and Creator.^{xxxviii} Furthermore, as is the case with the other two Persons of the Trinity, we acknowledge God the Father each time we recite one of the three historic Creeds of the Church.

And where all Christians acknowledge that they are the children of the same Father, they are necessarily united in one divine family.

V. Conclusion:

Thus, whether we are considering the larger issue of the apparent fragmentation of Christendom or the nearer one of the apparent fragmentation of traditional Anglicanism, we would do well to reflect on the seven essential aspects of unity that St. Paul set before the Ephesians in today's Second Lesson. When we do so, we must see that we are already far more unified than is otherwise suggested by our disagreements or disparities in practice.

Once we realize that we already have important forms of unity, we may be in a better frame of mind to continue to abide by, and ever increasingly to exemplify, Paul's urgent injunction: "I, therefore, ... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."^{xxxix}

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May 13, 2010.

ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Daniel 7: 9-10, 13-14 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ephesians 4: 1-16 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Ephesians 4: 1-3 (RSV).*

^v *The Anglican Church in America, which is the U.S. representative of the TAC.*

^{vi} *The Anglican Catholic Church, one of the original “St. Louis” or “Continuing Anglican” Churches of 1977-78.*

^{vii} *The Anglican Church of North America, a name which was initially used by the ACC and is now used by North American aspirants to Lambeth Communion membership who organized themselves as a new Province in 2009.*

^{viii} *The Anglican Mission in America, a 2000 – i.e., post-St. Louis – secession from PECUSA.*

^{ix} *The Anglican Province of America, a 1995 secession from the ACA.*

^x *The Anglican Province of Christ the King, one of the three “St. Louis” Churches of 1977-78.*

^{xi} *The Convocation of Anglicans in North America, a 2006 – i.e., another post-St. Louis – secession from PECUSA.*

^{xii} *The Diocese of the Holy Cross, a secession ca. 2005 from the APCK.*

^{xiii} *The Episcopal Missionary Church, a 1992 – i.e., post-St. Louis – secession from PECUSA.*

^{xiv} *The Federation of Anglican Churches in the Americas, a para-church fellowship.*

^{xv} *Forward in Faith, a para-church fellowship which has two branches, FiF-NA or Forward in Faith – North America, and FiF-UK. Despite its not being an actual church jurisdiction, it has “elected” and obtained consecration for at least two bishops who were identified as being consecrated for FiF, just as though it possessed both jurisdiction and mission.*

^{xvi} *The Reformed Episcopal Church, an 1873 – and thus pre-St. Louis – secession from PECUSA that formed in opposition to the growing influence of the Oxford Movement.*

^{xvii} *The Traditional Anglican Communion, which is the international arm of the ACA.*

^{xviii} *The United Episcopal Church of North America, a 1981 secession from the ACC which is therefore regarded as one of the three “St. Louis” Churches.*

^{xix} *Cf. Judges 12: 5-6.*

^{xx} *Ephesians 4: 3-6 (RSV).*

^{xxi} *Ephesians 1: 22-23; 5: 30; Colossians 1: 18.*

^{xxii} *Society of the Holy Cross, 1990 (rev. ed. 1997).*

^{xxiii} *St. Matthew 28: 19.*

^{xxiv} *St. Matthew 3: 11; cf. St. John 1: 33, 3: 5, 6: 63, and Acts 11: 16; FRANCIS J. HALL AND FRANK HUDSON HALLOCK, THEOLOGICAL OUTLINES 3rd Ed. 217, 253 (Wipf & Stock Publishers 2004).*

^{xxv} *HALL AND HALLOCK, op. cit. 252-53.*

^{xxvi} *St. Luke 12: 12; Acts 1: 5 & 8.*

^{xxvii} *St. John 14: 16-17, 14: 26, 15: 26.*

^{xxviii} *HALL AND HALLOCK, op cit. 218-20.*

^{xxix} *St. John 11: 25.*

^{xxx} *St. John 6: 40.*

^{xxxi} *Acts 23: 6 & 26: 6-7; cf. Romans 5: 2 & 15: 4; Galatians 5: 5; Colossians 1: 5; Titus 1: 2.*

^{xxxii} *I Peter 3: 15 (RSV).*

^{xxxiii} *St. Matthew 28: 18.*

^{xxxiv} *St. Luke 1: 32-33.*

^{xxxv} *II Peter 1: 11.*

^{xxxvi} *See Section IV.B. supra.*

^{xxxvii} *HALL AND HALLOCK, op. cit. 252-53.*

^{xxxviii} *Cf. St. Matthew 5: 45, 7: 11, 10:20 & 10: 32; St. Mark 8: 38 & 11: 25; St. Luke 10: 21-22 & 23: 46; St. John 1: 14.*

^{xxxix} *Ephesians 4: 1-3 (RSV).*

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