

Sermon for Trinity XVII Michael Silver

Saint Paul (if indeed he wrote Ephesians, but a sermon is not the place for that argument) speaks quite naturally and confidently in today's Epistle of the Spirit-filled Church. One baptism, he proclaims, one faith, the Spirit animating all.

Yet we, at this distance of time, in troubled, discontented Western world, at this point in history, having gone through the Reformation (or several reformations) and periods of scepticism, both outside and inside the Church - our experience is of a certain spiritual emptiness.

The Church, however, is not empty. But, arguably, it is emptier. It depends on how one looks at it, not least if observing that gimcrack imposture of modern self-help which calls itself "positive thinking".

This re-appraisal was prompted by poor Theresa May's much ridiculed presentation strategy at her party conference (and I do not mean the accidents!) Not that I am so sad as to have been glued to broadcasts of the Conservative Party Conference or even to News at Ten. But one would have to be living under a stone to be unaware of the main outlines of the event.

Presentation, preparation and a positive message make their mark. Hesitations, second thoughts and mixed impressions do not. This has ever been the truth. Possibly, the window-dressing counts for slightly more in today's world, but the truth is that product knowledge and product confidence have always counted, whereas academic and critical reservations have never carried conviction or fuelled great revolutions in history.

And this is where Anglican traditionalism comes under the spotlight. We have retained the self-critical aspect of Anglicanism without rediscovering the confidence that many traditionally-minded churches and movements experience.

Ever so often, I find myself in Russia. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that a new church (or a re-opened one) is completed every week. And I thank God for it, but I am not starry-eyed about it. What the new emperor has given, his successor can take away. And there is limited theology, much superstition in this revival.

Is it not likewise with the current advances of Roman Catholicism in, say, Africa, or with revivalist protestant advances in parts of the Americas? We traditional Anglicans find problems and objections. And so the said Orthodox, Roman Catholics and revivalists would shake their heads in disbelief at us. "No wonder your churches are empty. The actions of the Holy Spirit are in front of your eyes, but all that you can see are difficulties. "As ye sow, so shall ye reap". Is it not so?"

So, what is to be done? My honest appraisal is that, consistently, in preaching and in life, I have overlooked or down-played the benefits and blessings that are inseparable from our faith. They are there, but we may (and I do) underestimate or over-look them.

Nevertheless - and you would expect me to add this much - our particular form of Anglican caution with its roots in academic training has its place. We should not grieve the Spirit, but, most assuredly, we are bound to "test the spirits". Much that passes for progress and revival in the contemporary church scene is a sham, or at least deeply flawed. But God, we know, accepts the wheat and the tares growing together. This does not appear to "worry" Him - and how could we attribute "worry" to a God who is impassible and so incapable of being worried? Moreover, God does not want the wheat and tares to worry us excessively either.

It is very hard for us to get the balance right, but neither the health of theological study nor the continuance of the Church depend upon the quality of our scrutiny. We must "test the spirits", but we thank God for sending His Spirit into the Church, the faith it proclaims and the Baptism it bestows.

I had prepared thus far when I was shown the recent "Agreement Establishing Full Communion (Communio in sacris)" among various of our American brethren, specifically the Anglican Catholic Church, the Anglican Church in America, the Anglican Province of America and the Diocese of the Holy Cross. The cautious Anglican in me fears that we have been here before, and wonders whether it will last. Probably, what has been agreed there should be echoed in this country. But we do have to "test the spirits". Yet this may in God's providence be a recovery of the Way and a gift of His Spirit.

"One baptism, one faith, the Spirit animating all." So be it, Lord.

For convenience, here is the full text of the agreement.

Agreement Establishing Full Communion (Communio in sacris)

Among

The Anglican Catholic Church

The Anglican Church in America

The Anglican Province of America

The Diocese of the Holy Cross

We the undersigned, belonging to and holding the faith of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, as received by the Church of England in the days of her orthodoxy, and as Continued by Anglicans in North America in response to the call of the Congress of Saint Louis in 1977, agree to the following:

- We acknowledge each other to be orthodox and catholic Anglicans in virtue of our common adherence to the authorities accepted by and summarized in The Affirmation of Saint Louis in the faith of the Holy Tradition of the Undivided Catholic Church and of the seven Ecumenical Councils.
- We recognize in each other in all essentials the same faith; the same sacraments; the same moral teaching; and the same worship; likewise we recognize in each other the same Holy Orders of bishops, priests, and deacons in the same Apostolic Succession, insofar as we all share the episcopate conveyed to the Continuing Churches in Denver in January 1978 in response to the call of the Congress of Saint Louis; therefore,
- We welcome members of all of our Churches to Holy Communion and parochial life in any and all of the congregations of our Churches; and,
- We pledge to pursue full, institutional, and organic union with each other, in a manner that respects tender consciences, builds consensus and harmony, and fulfils increasingly our Lord's will that his Church be united; and,
- We pledge also to seek unity with other Christians, including those who understand themselves to be Anglican, insofar as such unity is consistent with the essentials of catholic faith, order, and moral teaching.

The Rt. Rev. Brian R. Marsh

The Most Rev. Mark Haverland

The Rt. Rev. Walter Grundorf

The Rt. Rev. Paul Hewett