

## C ASCENSION 1 -2010

The Gospel today speaks of Jesus' passionate desire for his followers to be one, not just in his own lifetime but also amongst those all around the world who would follow after. Perhaps he guessed that with the message spreading, as it indeed did, in the years after the Ascension, unity would be difficult to maintain among all the different peoples and traditions. Well, he was certainly right; in many cases the things which divide us are not actually anything to do with theology but more to do with culture. Only in unity will the message of hope and salvation be effective in the world. "Yeh, well, what these Christians say sounds good enough, so why don't they do it?"

Throughout the Bible there is a constant theme around unity; unity through the call of God; unity in the call to obedience; unity in the need for mission and purpose; unity in the call for a very special life style. In the words of the prophet Micah, **"He has showed you O man what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."** The Jews were called into a special relationship with God. That call passed down through them to us. The message of Micah refers to us as well.

So close is the relationship God wants us to have with each other, that we are called into a fellowship that Paul described as the Body of Christ. **"So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."** That from Romans and to the Corinthians he wrote, **"Now you are the Body of Christ and each one is a part of it."** And Paul explained how this should work in the communities he founded. Just as a human body has many parts doing different things and no part is unnecessary, so it is with the fellowship of the church; **"We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us; prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ministry in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader in diligence; the compassionate in cheerfulness."** The symbol of that union between ourselves and between us and God is at once a coming together in a shared meal; a sacrament, the mark of God's grace; the seal of the fellowship, and also the cement that binds us, is the service we have come to share in today, the Holy Communion. Paul again; **"The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the Blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the Body of Christ?" Because there is one bread we who are many are one body because we all partake of the one bread."** It is a bitter irony, that the very sacrament of unity is the very symbol of our disunity. The official line remains that Anglicans and others may not share in the Catholic Mass and vice versa. Fortunately the reality on the ground is rather different, and rightly so. In our refusal to walk humbly with our God, we disobey Christ. This is a tragedy for us in the church; it is also a disaster for our ministry to the world.

Unity of course is not only important for the church. It is just as important for families too. So many things go into making a lasting relationship; love of course, and we all know that being in love is a very different experience from attraction. But it seems to me that friendship is a vital part, to be best mates as well as lovers, as well as partners is a very sound basis. Kindness too, to meet and cherish the real vulnerability, the openness to being hurt that comes when you love or allow yourself to be loved. The breakup of a marriage is one of the most painful experiences we can ever have, and the unity of two people is the most satisfying experience of life. Jesus spoke very little about human sexuality, but he spoke about marriage and quoted Genesis, **"For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and be united with his wife, and they will become one flesh."** And he went on to say, **"They are no longer two but one flesh."** We are back to one Body again. No wonder that in the marriage service in the Book of Common Prayer, marriage is described as "signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his church." Instability in families for what ever reason makes for instability in society. The Government is right to encourage faithfulness and commitment between partners. People are fulfilled, children are nurtured and society is strengthened

Ah society! Mr Cameron has described British society as broken, which seems to me to be unnecessarily alarmist. He should stop reading the Daily Mail, and get out more. If I lived in London and read the Mail on

a regular basis, I'd be afraid of leaving the house. I would be certain of being attacked by knife wielding thugs in hoodies, or killed in a stampede of illegal immigrants, or forcibly converted to Islam by one handed fanatical Mullahs. I do feel sorry for you all!! How does that song by Noel Coward begin? "They're out of sorts in Sunderland and terribly cross in Kent, they're dull in Hull, and the Isle of Mull is seething with discontent." Well it may not be as bad as that, but we all know there are very difficult times ahead for us whether here on Madeira or in England. And we can only begin to tackle them and in time to solve them, if we are all unified in a common cause. Unified in the way that all of us can play a part in the recovery. Unified in a way that is fair to all. But there are signs of hope around us, signs that when necessary we can all pull together. Hope is very important. It is not, as the Greeks believed the last thing to go before disaster strikes, but a gift of God which gives us courage and determination, and above all a vision of what might be. We have come together in Europe in a way that has no parallel in history since the fall of the Roman Empire. We have had no wars in Western Europe for 65yrs. There have been many things which have helped but above them all is the European Union, for all its faults that is its greatest purpose and its greatest success. And one small thing in the great scheme of things perhaps, but in the May Day parade in Red Square this year there were battalions of troops from France and America, and Scots Guards from Britain. In their red tunics and bear skins, Do you remember those grim parades of old? Battalions of goose stepping troops clutching their rifles, huge intercontinental ballistic missiles, with over it all from the roof of Lenin's tomb an equally grim line of ghastly old embittered waxworks, bedecked with medals, looking down; too grim for words. This time the guards were cheered by their Russian hosts. This small sign of unity is the work of the Holy Spirit.

In England too there is a sign of unity, a realization that the problems are too great to be solved by just one section of political opinion, we all knew that, that's what we voted for. And our leaders have risen to the challenge, of course it can all end in tears, but I for one am putting my hope of Messers Cameron and Clegg. (They look so young; I've got used to policemen looking like school boys, but it's a bit depressing when the Prime minister looks young. You don't know whether you should be voting for them or giving them a rusk). They have come together at a critical time for all of us. I hope the spirit of unity which has brought them together will sustain them in the years and months to come. I'm sure that is all our prayer. The Uncle of a friend of mine used to talk about putting the great back into Great Britain; knowing his politics I think for him it would have involved the re-invasion of India. But being great is a good thing. Tom Paine the 18thC political philosopher said, "When it be said of any country of the world, my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars, my poor are happy and neither ignorance or distress are to be found among them, the elderly are not in want, the taxes not excessive. The rational world is my friend because I am the friend of its happiness. Then may I boast of its constitution." Then may a country be peace and unity with itself and truly be called great.

We Christians must never forget the words of Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, **"There is one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism. There is one God who is Father of all.**

Neil Dawson 16 May 2010