

The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, year 'B'
19 July, 2009
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

- Ephesians 2: 14

When Herbert Hensley Henson was appointed Canon of Westminster Abbey and Rector of St. Margaret's in 1900, he sacked the then organist, Edwin Lemare, who was one of the great virtuosos of his time. During his tenure, services at St. Margaret's had become something like concerts; worship came second. Henson would have none of this, but his summary dismissal of the organist left Lemare with a bitter taste of the church in his mouth. In time it was said of him that "he knew too much of Churches to be a religious man."

We all can, probably, identify with this sentiment. Too often our own parishes are hotbeds of those things which are exactly the opposite of Christian values. Many – most – are torn by strife and hostility, by factions and cabals, by manipulators and whiners. The most deficient commodity seems so often to be unity.

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul (or whichever of his followers wrote the letter) tells us that Christ breaks down the dividing wall of hostility, estrangement and division. The letter speaks of a rapprochement between Jews and non-Jews, one of the major themes of the New Testament letters. In modern parlance we might speak of believers and non-believers, or of those who are in and those who are out, or even of the good and the bad. All of us would do well to consider seriously in what ways we contribute to the culture of exclusion and intolerance which characterizes so much our common life. None of us is immune from the propensity to shun, belittle and dismiss those with whom we disagree and whom we think unsuitable candidates for God's favour. There is not one of us who has not erected some wall or put a barrier around our hearts. There is not one of us who has not been consumed by our own vanity (that is part of what it means to be sinful) so that we have become so self-absorbed as to assume that our own point of view must always be right and our voice must always be heeded. There is not one of us, in short, who has not been self-centred and self-serving.

The upshot is that churches are now increasingly being organized by their adherents so that they contain cabals of like-minded duplicates. For some the idealized Church is place for the morally pure and unambiguously virtuous. For others it is a society with simplistic rules and guidelines. For yet others it is an anodyne establishment dispensing unequivocal approval. These idealized churches are in fact nothing more than monuments to human desires – human sinfulness – which, having been vested in the odour of sanctity, are believed to be actual representations of the Divine. It is easy to love the entertaining, the attractive, and the well connected. But what of the others? It is easy to erect walls, impose

guidelines and insist on uniformity of belief and practice. But what of those on the other side? This is precisely where the Christian religion is seen to be not an affair of sentiment and emotional indulgence, but what it truly is – a painful discipline which goes against the grain of our self-seeking.

We must learn to see beyond our desires of what the Church *should* be to what it *is*: a society of sinners. Such recognition is more radical than you might think, for it means that we are all in the same boat. Sinfulness is the basic human condition. That means that within the Church there are the morally pure and the impure, the law-abiding and the lawless, the approving and the censorious. To believe that the Church should consist of people who are like us and think like us is to miss the point, for it is to assume that the Church exists so that those who belong to it may be virtuous, may be right, and may be acceptable. But in fact it is the company of all faithful believers. That is to say, it is composed of those, who, despite the poverty and paucity of their lives and despite the terrible evidences of their sinfulness, have nevertheless responded to the gift of God's great grace and mercy in the only way appropriate: by an act of faith. It is therefore not sinlessness that is a precondition for belonging; it is faith alone. True: the Church is a citadel, but it is a citadel of faith.

Thus the Church comprises people like you and me *and* people unlike you and me who, responding by faith to God's grace and love, have been called forth to proclaim to the world what God's purposes are: that all people – the good, the bad, the ugly – live together under his rule in service to him and his kingdom. Exactly how that kingdom is bodied forth and by whom we cannot know. But we can know that God's call to be part of his Kingdom, his Church, is offered to all if only they respond, as I said just a moment ago, in faith.

What this means in practical terms is that as Christians, as pilgrims, we become truly alive when we cease to put ourselves first and when we cease to contrive to get our own way. It doesn't mean that we must become drones with no personality, nor does it mean that we should have no opinions or that there can be no discussion or debate. What it does mean is that we all are to contribute that which God has given us – talents, time, treasure – not so that we may selfishly advance our own agenda, but so that the Kingdom may grow and flourish. In so doing we must recognize that we are all, in a very real sense, in this together; there is no room for pride or arrogance or mean-spiritedness, and personal interests and agenda must come second.

Those who follow Christ express their unity in him in love. Unity is *in him*. It is not in the institutional structures of the Church, based as they are on flawed and flimsy human notions. The kind of unity many of us desire is a sham; it is illusory; it is like the image of the perfect family, which, while perfect in all things on the outside, within is riddled with abuse, hatred and hostility. Yes: there may be unity without but within it is a lie, for beneath the surface is disunity and discord. And the maintenance of the lie is destructive and costly.

So we must not despair that the Church appears not to embody our ideals of what it should be, and that those whom we neither like nor think appropriate are as much a part of it as we are, for appearances are deceptive. We must stop looking in the clouds for the fantasy and realize that the Church which prefigures and points to the kingdom is found here and now even through the most surprising people and in the most unlikely of places. And for that we must thank God.