

Unity Sunday Combined Service 10.30 a.m. and 2pm Services

Topic: Holy Trinity: Unity in Diversity

Trinity 15, 12th September 2010 - Augustine Nwaekwe

Texts: Isaiah 56: 3-8; Revelation 7: 9-12; Matthew 21: 12-16

Opening Prayer: Oh God, give me grace to speak in your name, and give us grace to hear your word. Amen.

Two headlines among others have dominated the dailies and the internet world over the past few days. The first is the plan of an American pastor Terry Jones to burn the Koran in commemoration of the anniversary of those that lost their lives in the 9/11 attack. The second is the visit of the Roman Pontiff to the Kingdom of Great Britain. There have been lots of issues and debates surrounding the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Great Britain, issues dealing with the budgeted cost of his visit- whether it is right to use the tax-payers money to finance his visit. Many people want to know if he is coming to the UK on a political or on a religious and pastoral visit. (At least there is one thing I know; the Pope does not require a diplomatic or visiting visa to the UK).

Secularism is a big challenge to churches in UK, and many Roman Catholics and Anglicans in the UK simply agree that the Pope's visit would be fruitful were he to come to the UK leaving behind him his conservative stance on doctrine...and try to show more attention and interest in ethical issues, Christian unity and corporation. This many feel would be a consolidation of the work of Pope John Paul II. Perhaps considering the Personal Ordinariate that the Pope had initiated a few months ago for disaffected Anglicans, the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, says that the Pope's coming is not a fishing of Anglicans in the UK (see Church Times, 10 Sept. 2010).

An Anglican priest could decide to marry or to remain celibate, but a Roman Catholic priest must vow to remain celibate. The Anglican Church has women priests; whereas the Catholic Church does not. For many Christians and theologians, this is diversity, it makes the universal Church richer...that what I do not have, you have; and so in unity, we celebrate our diversity!¹

According to plans, this week Pope Benedict XVI will worship at Westminster Abbey, and will be greeted by a woman priest for the first time- the Rev canon Jane Hedges, a Canon and Steward of Westminster Abbey, as he worships at Westminster Abbey on Friday evening. (Church Times 10 Sept. 2010). As a mark of unity, the programme of service reads:

During the evening prayer, the pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury will each give an address; both will say prayers at the shrine of St Edward the Confessor, while Rowan Williams prays for the State and the Church, Benedict prays for Christian Unity. They will both give a joint benediction/blessing from the High Altar.²

¹ "Whatever is wrought by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of our separated brothers and sisters can contribute to our edification". *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1.4). *Ut Unum Sint* (28) describes ecumenical dialogue as a reciprocal learning process and an 'exchange of gifts'.

² See <http://www.westminster-abbey.org/press/news/news/2010/july/pope-benedict-xvi-to-attend-abbey-service-of-evening-prayer>.

It is believed that the Church will be stronger in its attempt to fight secularism when it begins to see diversity from the perspectives of strength and richness. This is why Timothy Radcliffe, a Dominican monk has this to say: Christianity can only be alive in Europe, if it is open to itself and to what is not itself.

Today, on the local level at Holy Trinity, we celebrate our unity in diversity. Perhaps you have not been to our new website: there we define 'ourselves' as a Church with tremendous diversity; with people from many language groups, races, and social backgrounds. We include single people, families, ex-pats, refugees, and long-established citizens of our host country- so if Belgium is our host country, who are we?

Isaiah had in his earlier vision prophesied the inclusion of foreigners into the Israelite community. God's intention here is not to undermine the vocation of Israel as the light of the nations as promised in Isaiah 49:6. "I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." According to his vision in Chapter 2:2-4, he says: 'In the last days, the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it'. God, the primary agent in this passage, is characterized as a gatherer. God overcomes outcast-ness in whatever form it takes.

During the time of the exile, Israel was an outcast among other nations but the Lord in his great love and compassion promises to gather them safely back home. (See chapters 40-55 of Isaiah). And because this salvation or deliverance of God is near and close at hand, therefore the inclusion of eunuchs and foreigners become a constitutive part of God's gathering of the outcasts of Israel. The foreigners that Isaiah is talking about here are not immigrants as we might commonly assume...but we do not need to press on this or to make politics out of it.

St Paul agrees with the prophet Isaiah in his letter to the Ephesians by affirming that Gentile Christians are no longer strangers and aliens, but members of the household of God. This household is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ himself as the chief corner stone. And because Christ is the chief cornerstone, we cannot do without him. He has priority; he sets the pattern for the building of the household. His pattern is that all barriers be broken down, so that none are strangers and aliens. Eph 2:14-20.

In the household of God, there may be differences in race, colour, in class, gender, immigration status, education, political opinion and economic condition, but these are not barriers to living in unity in the household of God.

In a world of diversity, we see differences as a barrier to our relationship with others! It is easy to discriminate- at times without our knowing it. When we have occasions, like parties, it is common to invite our best friends. But in Christ, God extends invitation to all. God invites the blind, the lame, the stranger, and the poor. In Christ, God touched the sick and made them whole. He made sinners clean. He equally allowed himself to be touched by them. This is the condescension of our almighty God.

In a world driven by economic forces, we tend to hold to a higher esteem, and to reckon with those who are lucky to have got the financial means. There is this famous Nigerian movie in which the actor disguised himself as a poor man and approached a young lady for friendship. The lady looked at him...and with a very sad face, she said “am I in your class? Don’t you know that shoes have different sizes, am I your size? Please excuse me!” At Holy Trinity and outside of Holy Trinity, how ready are we to touch others, not just those in our class or category? How do we allow others to touch us? Or do we see others as people that do not belong to our class?

We bear the name Holy Trinity. St Augustine, one of the greatest thinkers of the early Church, described Trinity as comparable to the three parts of an individual human being: mind, spirit and will. They are three distinct aspects, yet they are inseparable and together constitute one unified human being. As Christians, what do we learn from the name that we bear, Holy Trinity? It is simple, we learn of the diversity of God, and the unity of the same God. As a Church, we are therefore being called to embrace diversity, to build bridges across people of different culture, language, race, class, colour, and ideas. Diversity is a gift. We do not necessarily have to agree on a particular issue or do things the same way before we can live in unity. We proclaim in the liturgy that even though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread- holding unto one faith, in one God, one Lord and Saviour, one baptism, and one hope.

And so as we celebrate our unity in diversity, we can be witnesses to the wider society. As the world gets more and more fragmented into so many groups and camps, along the lines of religion, race, military and economic might, Holy Trinity Church at the centre of Brussels- the seat of the EU Parliament, can teach the world that differences among people exist, but community life is possible when barriers based on hostility are broken down. As a people who are made in God’s image, the bond of a common humanity ties us together, for the common good of all.

Our celebration of diversity today is a call to humble ourselves before God and before one another, to associate with people of low position, to recognize and to focus on the things that unite us, to continue to learn and to understand one another.

Holy Trinity Church is therefore a house prayer for all nations! Our vision is to build a “foretaste of heaven” community, such that would fit very well to the vision and description of St John the Divine: After this I looked and there was a great multitude, (a great crowd) that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands...singing and praising God. Amen! Blessings and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen. As we join together today to worship God, may our praise and worship be acceptable to God, and may we like the heavenly multitude, united in diversity, worship God in the beauty and unity of the Holy Trinity, now and forever!