



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

The Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity – Breathing with one lung

Readings: Jonah 3: 1-5, 10, Ps 24, 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31, Mark 1: 14-20

As we are now at the end of another Week of Prayer for Christian Unity I promised that this would be the subject of this week's homily. As the survivor of forty years of ecumenical services (and I know some of you have much longer experiences) I feel I have a little authority to speak.

For Catholics successive Popes have made it clear that the great enterprise for unity is a priority. It remains so because it is the mind of Christ and because we disfigure His image by our division and tear at the seamless robe of His Church by our disobediences. We know that the constant shivering of the post-Reformation churches into a million protestant splinters is a poor witness for the Gospel.

Our annual efforts to redress this seem woefully inadequate. A few good hearted stalwarts wheel out for a coming together in dismal paraliturgies with moribund sects preached at, generally, by theological illiterates. Your experience may be luckier than mine. But overall the whole dreary enterprise is light years from the hopeful heyday of ecumenical enterprise and gives us, on the whole, greater clarity about what we may **not** do together than what we may. There seems to me little value in these exercises other than to continue basic courtesies. It

is good that Catholic children are not stoned on their way to Mass and it is cheering to think that Protestants may not necessarily be going to Hell. However the sight of twenty people on a Holy Week ecumenical procession through the streets of Bodmin is unlikely to lift the heart much and unlikely to do anything other than perplex busy shoppers.

In my experience the most significant place where ecumenism is done is in community and on mission. Here at Sclerder Abbey, with the arrival of Chemin Neuf, an ecumenical community, you have the opportunity to investigate the truth of that. I have always found that, when I am dosed down on a church hall floor with a mission team of various denominations, the only thing that matters, when we rise to go out in the morning, is Jesus. We pray together. We read God's Word together and then we go out and try to bring people to a knowledge and love of God.

We discover things about one another – people are always shocked at how Biblical Catholicism is – and how 'Christian'. Participating undermines a lot of the lies of the Reformation Settlement and unites us on the basis of truth.

Catholics who are not interested in mission are being disobedient to the Great Commission of Jesus and to the command at the end of every Mass.

Protestants who are not seeking their part in the reuniting of the Universal Church are wilfully setting their cultural preferences and personal comfort above the mind of Christ.

Living together and common mission are the keys to unity and reunion.

But there is a wound deeper than the one we observe daily in the stale smorgasbord of the Western religious high street.

Recently the Pope visited Istanbul to meet the Ecumenical Patriarch. The Patriarchate in this Islamic city is up a side alley and guarded around the clock. It is all that remains of the great centre of Eastern Christendom, Constantinople, the centre of the Roman Empire for a thousand years.

The seeds of this spectacular fall were set in the Great Schism of 1054 when the delegates of the Pope excommunicated the Patriarchate because, among other things, of his closure of the Latin Churches. The east refused to help the west under the Norman assault and the Macedonian persecutions. Later the west would not only refuse to help but drag the fourth crusade through Constantinople, against the will of the Pope, and sack and loot it. Subsequent attempts to heal in the 13th and 15th centuries came to nothing.

In 1453, unaided by the west and surrounded by Ottoman Turks, Constantinople, after a terrifying siege, fell.

The future of the east became Islamic and the Byzantine Empire and its various states across the Balkans, fell to the sword of Islam and remained under its sway for centuries.

For three centuries southern Europe was constantly assaulted, her children enslaved and her lands occupied. As late as 1683 the Muslim armies were repelled from the gates of Vienna by a Polish king. The West did little to assist and subsequently, when there was a choice,

preferred to prop up a declining Islamic empire rather than risk the expansion of the one great free remaining Christian country, Russia.

It is therefore scarcely surprising that the wounds run deep and we struggle to understand the psyche of our eastern brothers and sisters.

But the Orthodox remain vital to any equation of unity. Their orders are valid. Their sacraments are true. Their traditions are unbroken.

Saint John-Paul II, a Slav himself, memorably remarked that, without the Orthodox, the Church was breathing on one lung.

So, aside from our own little domestic difficulties with the Reformation, we must never forget the bigger picture. We must pray for Papal initiatives, the building of trust and friendship, the support of our Christian allies under persecution and insist that our politicians know their history before they make foolish alliances which undermine and tear at the very fabric of the once Christian world. Bringing the great Christian power of the east, Russia, in from the cold, whatever her present pretensions or follies, is a vital work for both Church and State.

The Christian east is long used to the betrayals of the west. It would be a tragedy if we marked the millennium of our wretched divisions by a similar failure of vision and courage. The vision of unity depends on community & mission at home, prayer and political engagement abroad.