

SERMON – THE 17TH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY – 16 OCTOBER 2011
St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

"There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Ephesians 4:4-6). There are two essential Biblical doctrines in the Epistle passage for this Sunday that must be held by all Christians if they are to call themselves "Christians" in any meaningful sense of that word.

The first is the greatest and most important truth of all—that there is One God who is the Blessed and Undivided Trinity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. If we do not know God as the Blessed Trinity, we do not know God as he is and as he has revealed himself to us.

The second essential Biblical doctrine found in this passage is this—that the Christian hope, the promise of eternal life and fellowship with God, is received by virtue of our membership in the one Body of Jesus Christ, namely the Church.

Because these are essential Biblical doctrines, they are also essential Anglican doctrines. And this offers us the opportunity this morning to briefly dwell on a question I get quite often, "How are we as Anglicans different from all the other "Christian denominations" in the world? It is not an easy question to answer, because we share many common characteristics with almost all of the other "Christian" denominations that exist.

In the eyes of many people, the use of the word "Catholic" is used in relationship to Anglicanism. "Catholic" comes from the Greek term *"katholikos"* meaning "according to the whole". It is unfortunate that the word, "Catholic" came to be exclusively associated with the Roman Catholic Church. It is also the proud possession of the Eastern Orthodox Churches and of the Old Catholic Church, and it should equally be the proud possession of Anglicans. For what does "Catholic" mean? The theologically best description comes from Vincent of Lerins in the 5th century: "that which has been believed everywhere, always, by everyone", and denotes a Christian religion which is full and complete and clearly continuous with the primitive Church established by Jesus Christ and continued by the Apostles and their successors until the time of "The Great Schism" in 1054 AD. The Church of England, from which all Anglicans descend, was the Catholic Church in England as it derived from the Apostles through the early Celtic Church, the Church of St. Augustine, and the Church of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I in England. While it was separated from the Roman Pope by Henry VIII and in succeeding reigns was simplified, purified and purged of Roman excesses, it never ceased to be demonstrably "Catholic", and came in that character to America.

At the same time, Anglicanism is "Protestant" insofar as it has "protested" against the supreme authority of the Pope. It is also "Reformed" insofar as it has always sought to remove from its faith, practice and worship those abuses which crept into the Church at various times from the Dark Ages to more modern times. In these limited senses, Anglicanism is indeed "Protestant",

and honorably so. However, that fact still remains that theologically and historically, Anglican Churches are Catholic. Catholicism goes back to the beginning. Protestantism stems essentially from the 16th century, and marks a break theologically as well as organizationally with the established, historic form of Christianity. Anglicans retain the full and complete faith of original undivided Christianity, its Sacramental form, its Apostolic succession of bishops, its adherence to the ancient Creeds, its foundational base on the Holy Scriptures, and its continuity with the primitive Church. These are the fundamental marks of Catholicism, shared with the Eastern Orthodox, the Roman Catholics, and Old Catholics, and Lutherans, and some others. With a foot planted in both camps, albeit more so in the Catholic one, Anglicanism has always thought of itself as a kind of bridge which might some day in God's providence, be used to bring together the Catholic and Protestant bodies.

So what makes us unique as Anglicans? Perhaps the easiest way to start addressing this question is to go back to the game I remember as a child when we would put everyone in a circle, and a designated person would whisper something into the ear of the person next to him, who would then turn to the person next to him and try to repeat what he had heard. This would go around the entire circle, and then the person who started it would say what he had said, and the last person in the chain would repeat what he had heard. And the difference between the two was truly amazing! Most religious denominations are in a similar position today. The Church has existed for 2000 years, and with every passing year and every new person who claims to speak for the Church, the words have become changed to the point that potentially what is said now has no relationship at all to what was originally said or intended. Perhaps this is intentional, or perhaps not, but we come to the present day, and find everyone trying to fit the ancient church and Holy Scripture into a new culture and way of living. Even the beloved Episcopal Church that many of us hearken from is heavily into trying to reinterpret and allow a "plurality" of meanings into the way Holy Scripture is understood and related to by others.

So how are we different as Anglicans? Much of what follows is quoted from Fr. Louis R. Tarsitano, one of the most lucid and insightful defenders of the Anglican faith that has existed since the time of its establishment. We are not focused on trying to change Scripture to fit today's environment. We are focused on taking our beliefs and worship back to the time of the early church, to the beliefs and practices that existed from the time of Christ until the separation of the Eastern and Western churches about a thousand years ago. We claim no "special doctrines" of our own, but only the entire Christian Faith that was believed in common by the members of the undivided Church. We say the same Creeds, and we proclaim the same Blessed Trinity. We teach the same unique Church, the One Body of Jesus Christ, that existed prior to the divisions of the past one thousand years. We go back to the early Church in an attempt to practice the authentic religion established by Christ.

We never claim to be the whole Church, but only one household within the One Church. We do not un-church or condemn our Christian neighbors. As anyone can read in our Second Office of Instruction, we define the Church as "the Body of which Jesus Christ is the Head, and all baptized people are the members" (BCP 290). We confirm this simple definition as spiritual,

rather than institutional, when at the Holy Communion in our Prayer of Thanksgiving we declare the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ to be "the blessed company of all faithful people" (BCP 83). If we claim anything, we claim only to be the original Church before everyone decided they needed to be different.

If, then, we do not deny God's gift of salvation to our Christian brethren, despite their differences from us, some might make the mistake of deciding that those differences do not matter at all, and others might ask themselves the question "Why bother being an Anglican? Why bother with the greater duties and discipline of the Anglican Way, almost unknown in most American congregations today? Why bother making the social and economic sacrifices necessary to stand apart from the "mainline denominations" (including the Episcopal Church), and apart from the many new sects that seem to rise up almost every day?"

The simple answer is that the Anglican life is worth the bother precisely because the various differences among Christians do matter, and because, at the extreme, those differences over the last thousand years have in many cases come to define the point where one ceases to be a Christian in the Biblical sense of "being a follower of Jesus Christ" and becomes a "Christian" in name only.

For example, a person who does not believe all of the most basic Scriptural truths that are summarized in the Creeds is not a Christian, because he is not following the Living Word of God, no matter how many churches he belongs to. No one is expected to write a theological treatise explaining the Creeds, but all of us are obligated, by the love of God and for the sake of salvation, to trust in God completely and to take him at his self-revealing Word.

Take it a step further; many decent people might reason that, as long as the members of a Christian congregation are saved, how they serve and worship God is a matter of indifference, that there is no final right or wrong in how one lives a Christian life. Once again, such a line of reasoning is as wrong as it is possible to be.

To focus our attention on salvation alone is to miss the broader point of Christianity, which is the glorification and worship of God by our entire lives, in everything that we say or do, just as Jesus Christ lived, died, and rose again to glorify his Father in heaven. Christianity isn't about us, not even about our being saved. We are not to organize our lives to please ourselves or to save ourselves, but to please the great and good God who has saved us, and to make his glory known to all mankind.

As St. Paul tells us, "For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Corinthians 6:20). Salvation means that we no longer belong either to the devil or to ourselves. We strive to live a good and moral life, according to the Scriptures, not because such a life brings credit to us, but because it brings credit entirely to God. This is exactly what our Lord meant when he said in the Sermon on the Mount: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

What then is the key to this Anglican form of worship that keeps us on the straight and narrow and original path? It is the Book of Common Prayer. It is the same disciplined order of daily prayer, daily Scripture, holy sacraments, true Creeds, faithful preaching and teaching, and the Apostles' ministry that was, for a thousand years, the unity of the undivided Church. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, in his God given wisdom, incorporated into one book of worship all the necessary elements that represented authentic Christian worship from the time of Christ and the Apostles. All the divisions in the Christian Church that have occurred in the last thousand years have followed from some departure from this Biblically-based order of life. Cranmer understood this, and restored this Biblically-based form of worship to the Anglican Church in the form of the Book of Common Prayer..

While the Book of Common Prayer may very well be the best guide to a complete life in Christ available in the world today, we do not say that our Christian brethren must adopt the Prayer Book. Nor do we claim that Anglicans have invented or discovered the best way of being a Christian. What we do say is that God in his goodness and mercy has preserved for us the identical life that he gave his Church at the beginning. The BCP maintains the ancient order of Christian life in our church; it glorifies God in the same way that the Son of God and the Holy Ghost first established the One Christian Church to glorify the Father in heaven. To be complete in Jesus Christ as the first Christians were complete in him does matter, and Anglicans don't care what kind of prayer book a church uses as long as all the Truth, all the Order, and all the Glory of God once delivered to the ancient Church are offered to people who use it.

Our goal as a parish and as Anglicans is to work with all that we have and all that we are to live the Christian life that we have inherited from our Lord, the Apostles, and the first Christians. Our calling is to demonstrate the Christian life as completely as we can, and by doing so to call others to the complete and blessed life that Jesus Christ alone can give. And this is why we pray the Collect for today: "Lord, we pray thee that thy grace may always go before and follow us, and make us continually to be given to all good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.