

3rd Sunday (A)

22nd January 2017

‘Christian Unity and the *Status Quo*’

Is 8–9: *land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali ...*

1Cor 1: *make up the differences between you ... be united in your belief & practice*

Mt 4:12–23: *Jesus began His preaching ...*

When one has visited the Holy Land — as I did last week — episodes like the calling of the first apostles by the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus’s settling in Capernaum, a fishing town by the Lake, really come to life. The surroundings of the Sea of Galilee are mostly quite unspoilt, in many ways unchanged from the Galilee of Our Lord’s own day. One can walk on the shoreline, take a boat out on the Lake, and easily imagine Jesus doing just the same as He began His ministry amongst that Jewish fishing community.

But one of the more *confusing* things about going to the Holy Land is, later, when one goes up to Jerusalem, to make sense of the Holy Sepulchre church — the central shrine of Christianity. It’s the place which includes both the site of Calvary (the Crucifixion) and the Tomb of Christ (His Resurrection), and therefore is perhaps the holiest site in all of Christendom. Part of the problem is that much of the original church built by St Helena in the 4th c. isn’t still

standing; so it’s confusing as you walk in ... one walks in what’s effectively a side entrance, and can find oneself totally disorientated. Under one roof is both the place venerated as Golgotha, and one can kneel down and touch the rock bed on which the Cross stood; and also the remains of the cave tomb on which Jesus’s dead body was laid, and from where He rose again. Both are heavily decorated in the Orthodox style, with lots of hanging lanterns and structures that make it rather hard to imagine the scene of 2000yrs ago when the crosses of execution stood in the open air outside Jerusalem’s city walls; and when the tombs really were still caves set into the hillside.

But, another confusion for the new pilgrim to the Holy Sepulchre is the plethora of Christian denominations who have a part of the church to care for. An agreement stretching back to the 18th and 19th centuries, termed the “*status quo*,” was designed to maintain a peaceful agreement between the various Christian groups, and to allocate to them their own portion of the great church. And in the parts of the church that are considered common

territory, no-one can do anything without the agreement of the six denominations. It works — but it doesn't seem very edifying. In a way, therefore, at the heart of the Christian faith is a rather blatant demonstration of the lack of Christian unity. In the very place of Jesus's Death and Resurrection, Christians are clearly not united: Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Ethiopian, Coptic and Syrian Orthodox churches divide up the use of the church, and their uses are governed by strict rules and schedules ... It's a workable solution, for the most part, but it probably upsets many pilgrims to see our Christian *disunity* so palpably displayed. It's not what Christ would have wanted.

Visitors to the Holy Land can also be reminded that there is *legitimate* diversity within the Church. Unity doesn't mean uniformity. Within the Catholic Church there are all sorts of rites. Not just the Latin rite that we are used to here in the West. In Jerusalem we were able to visit an Armenian-rite Catholic church; and in Nazareth we went to a Greek-rite Catholic church ... and it is beautiful to see the

varieties of Catholic worship, all in communion with our holy father the Pope ... but the sadness in the Christian world is that this unity-in-diversity has not been maintained throughout. Down the centuries, various groups have broken away, wounding the body of Christ, and separating off from the Catholic Church. For example, the Armenians right back in the 5th c.; the Orthodox, a huge schism in the 11th c.; and the Protestant reformation 500yrs ago. These have been tragedies that have hindered the preaching of the Gospel: tensions between different Christian groups compromise the witness of the Gospel that Christ is the Saviour for all. Some people will struggle to come to the Church when they see Christian fragmentation.

Nevertheless, there are always signs of hope, and we must always be committed to working for Christian unity. At the Holy Sepulchre church, this is exemplified in the fact that the Resurrection tomb is being repaired and restored: years of negotiations between the denominations have resulted finally in agreement, and it's one occasion when to see scaffolding is a real joy! It's good to see, in this most

holy of places, that co-operation and agreement has finally won through. Another great achievement recently was the meeting of Pope Francis with the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox church in Cuba back in February last year, the first meeting of these two Christian figures since the Great Schism of 1054. Likewise when the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople (head of all the Greek Orthodox) came to Pope Francis's inauguration as Pope in 2013, that also was a first. So, whilst sometimes Christian Unity may seem such a daunting prospect, and the historic separations insurmountable, yet God's Holy Spirit will always give us the impetus to keep talking, maintain dialogue and allow the tensions of centuries gradually to be defused.

In this Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity, let's ask Our Lord to work in us, too, amongst our families, that we may constantly reach out to other Christians, explain our faith, witness faithfully to Jesus's holy presence in the Mass, and so bring about reconciliation, and the cause of unity. May He never allow us to be happy with the *status quo* of divisions, but work in us for real and visible unity.

As St Paul says: "*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all*" (Eph 4:4–6).