

'You are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.'

1] In the story of the Tower of Babel, found in the book of Genesis, we are presented with an image of human beings imagining that they can build their own paradise on earth, their towers reaching the heavens. We may well speculate that, had humanity remained united, would they have seen themselves as gods? The same temptation was there in the beginning, in taking the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: 'Then the Lord God said, Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"— therefore the Lord God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken.' [Gen.3:22-23]

2] The confusion of tongues and the differentiation into the many nations of the earth, the very fragmentation of humanity, might be seen by some as a punishment inflicted by a wrathful deity. Yet it would better to see all this as part of the loving purposes of our man-befriending God; a part of His providence, with a view to our final salvation.

3] It is hardly surprising that in this age, aided and abetted by the wonders of its technology, that the Devil has subtly slipped in the same temptation: the reconstruction of the Tower of Babel. It has ever been part of the game plan of the Evil One to mimic on earth the blessings of heaven; to delude gullible souls with artifice and display. The whole movement towards globalisation, especially in economics and politics, seeks to abolish the divine order that, through the generations, has preserved the world from its own folly and hubris. As it says in the Acts of the Apostles, that God, indeed, made from one blood every nation on earth, and then determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings. (cf. Acts.17:26) Yet the pride and vainglory of most of mankind has long abandoned looking to God as the source of Life.

4] Let us be very clear: our unity is found in Christ, not in any human structure, philosophy, institution or organisation. The feast of Pentecost reminds us, year by year, that it is despite our differences of language and nationhood, God the Holy Spirit pours the same love of God into our hearts, and each hears the same Word of God in his own way.

5] In the past, in the story of our salvation, there was a particular division, a differentiation, a pre-selection within humanity, when God Himself chose one of those nations as His own people and separated them from the other families of mankind. Abraham's descendants, the children of Israel, were to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex.19:6) to prepare the way for the coming of the kingdom of God. But as ever in a fallen world, the preferring of one over another raises the passion of jealousy and what St Paul calls today, the dividing wall of hostility.

6] The empires of the world come and go, and ancient Israel fell under many in turn: Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Macedonia and the Rome, all trying to unify humanity under one rule by force-of-arms. In the fourth century before Christ, Alexander the Great had even sought to conquer the known world, dreaming of one-world religion with himself as a god among men. But he died in his thirty-third year at Babylon and his empire fell apart. And his successors in the Holy Land persecuted the nation of the Jews when they refused, under the heroic Maccabees, to accept Hellenic culture and worship foreign gods.

7] But now, the true union of mankind has come among us. Not one fabricated in human systems or towers built by our own efforts, but that which was revealed by the Divine Mystery itself. In writing to the church at Ephesus around the year 62AD, St Paul reminds them of the unity that they have in Christ. The Church, being the new creation of God Himself, cannot contain the divisions and enmities that exist outside, whether between Jew or Gentile, Greek or barbarian, male or female, slave or free. Racial, national, sexual and social boundaries are of no relevance in the context of our baptism into Christ.

8] Bearing in His own body on the cross the sins of Jew and Gentile alike, Christ is able to draw all into an eternal communion in the kingdom of God. The absolution of our sins brings peace, setting the scene, preparing the way, for reconciliation. Every attempt by mankind to build its own earthly paradise or perfect society has failed, for they were founded in Sin and alienated from the mind of our Creator. But the apostle tells us this morning that, through Christ, we are now ‘...No longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.’

9] We are now in the Nativity Fast, the six-week season in preparation for the feast of Our Lord’s incarnation. Soon, we shall observe the Sundays of the Forefather’s of Christ and the Righteous of the Old Testament. It is through Christ that they have become our own ancestors in the Faith: the New Israel formed alike from the believing children of Israel and the once estranged nations. We have no need to place the hopes of our own future in human Institutions, organisations, unions, forums, leagues or federations. Neither need we, who are chrismated and are endowed with the divine energies of the Holy Spirit, have any part in the spirit of this age and its obsessions. We, who by our faith in God, await a new heaven and a new earth (Apoc.21:1) can deal with the world but advisedly. More especially, let us not be caught up and entangled in the obsessions, enthusiasms and anxieties of the rest of the world. We have a simple choice: we can either fret and panic in any situation that comes upon us, or we can turn to Our Father in prayer and ask that His will be done.

10] In the gospel this morning a man came to Christ asking what he can do to reach eternal life. He is part of the old dispensation that through the commandments was to lead ancient Israel to this encounter with the Messiah, the giver and fulfilment of the Law. But now he discovers that the situation has changed: the new dispensation, the outpouring of God’s grace, will involve not the simple following of directions and rules, for human righteousness can never compare to the utter holiness of God. There is going to be something more expected; something that this man lacks.

11] This incident is not just about his wealth, the fact that he is in possession of great riches. That, in itself, does not prevent him following Christ. In the end it is his lack of faith; trust in God is the one thing that he lacks. His faith, his own self-assurance, is found in what he owns, not in God's providence. He has invested his future in the ownership of land, the ventures of merchants and speculators, the display of finery and the power and influence he has among men.

12] It is the same question that the Rich Fool in last Sunday's gospel never seemed to ask himself. But it one that we cannot avoid: how can we have treasure in heaven? Do we actually believe, in practice, that heavenly treasure is more important to us than what we have here? There's the rub, as they say: we who have died and risen with Christ in Baptism; we who say that our true life is hidden with Christ in God (Col.3:3), have we something lacking; elements in our life to which we still cling for a false security?

13] After this encounter in the gospel today, St Peter says to Christ that His disciples have left everything to followed Him. And Our Lord replies 'Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come eternal life' [Lk.18:29-30]

14] Let us use this season of the fast to scrutinise ourselves. when we come to Confession, when we repent, let us admit those things that we still cling to out of fear of letting go, whether it be the passions that yet burn within the soul, or the false idols that claim our trust, whether they be our possessions or powers, or position or even relationships; anything that stands in the way of entry into the kingdom of God.

15] We might imagine that this is just for monastics who are called to free themselves from that binds them in this world. Yet even for us, who have been given our place amidst the noise, the demands, the fever and busyness of the world, we too can toil in our own way in the ascetic struggle to find the liberty of the children of God. We

can hold what we have and yet, not be owned by our own possessions, through the generosity of our charity. By our struggle through the fast we can overcome the dominance of our own appetites. By the sacrifice of praise and the devotion of our prayers, we too can offer up ourselves and each other and our whole life unto Christ our God, receiving back what has been offered up, now transfigured and sanctified. We see the same in the Liturgy of the eucharistic sacrifice itself, where we offer bread and wine, the symbols of our whole life on earth and the antitypes of Christ Himself, 'Thine own of thine own, we offer unto Thee in behalf of all and for all,' only to receive back what is offered up: the very mystery of His body and blood unto remission of sins and unto life everlasting. What can be a greater, more valuable treasure?