

ST PATRICK'S DAY: LETCHWORTH

"I believe in the communion of saints".

Twice every day, 365 days a year, the Anglican church says this in the daily office, in the Apostles' creed, "I believe in the unity together of all believers who are baptized into Christ", in other words, "I believe in the communion of saints".

You may object - and I sympathize if you do - that I ought to take my text from Holy Scripture. Very well then, I give you two: -

1. St Paul to the baptized believers, to the saints, in the city of Colosse: "Your life is hidden with Christ in God" (3,3).
2. St Paul to the baptized believers, to the saints, in the city of Ephesus: "God raised us up with Christ and made us to sit with Christ in the heavenly places" (2,6).

We are accustomed to picture Christ after His Ascension as seated on His Father's right. We picture Him there as the All Ruler (Ephesians 1,10); our absolute King (Revelation 19,16); our High Priest Who ever lives to make intercession for us (Hebrews 3,1, Hebrews 7,25); our Barrister or Brief Who defends us in the judgement (1 John 2,1); our Redeemer Who pays the ransom for our kidnap by the Enemy (Mark 10,45); our Saviour Who rescues us from death and damnation. He is equal to the Father and as eternal as the Father. He therefore sits. He is the Father's agent or instrument in creation, preservation and rescue. He is therefore on the Father's right (Colossians 1,13 - 22).

We are accustomed to picture ourselves as far removed from the Father and His Son, far away on earth. But in my two Biblical texts St. Paul says something startling. We are not far off. We are already in some measure in heaven. We are not flat on our faces before the throne. We are not kneeling before the throne. We are not standing before the throne. We are not even seated before the throne. No, we are seated on the Father's right. And we are thus seated because we are integral to, inseparable from Christ. We are, as it were, bone of His bone, flesh of His flesh. We are with Christ. We are in Christ. Christ is in us. We are as much parts of His body as your fingers and toes are parts of you. The Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, is the Breath of God within us.

As you wash your dishes in the kitchen, as you shop for fish and chips, as you weed your garden, you are even now "with Christ in God", you are even now "sitting in Christ in the heavenly places". St. Paul says that your own Easter and Ascension are not future events. St. Paul says that even now you are involved in them. "Your life is hidden with Christ in God". "God raised us up with Christ and made us to sit with Christ in the heavenly places".

A good and devout evangelical lady said to an Anglican, "I have no need of Mary, Patrick and all the saints". In a sense she was right. We have our Saviour Who is all sufficient. St. Paul to the baptized believers, to the saints, in Rome: "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord and shalt believe in thy heart that God raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the mouth creed (or confession) is made unto salvation" (10,9 - 10). The terrified jailer in Philippi asked Paul after the earthquake, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul answered: "Believe in the Lord and thou shalt be saved". The jailer was immediately baptized, he and his ((Acts 16,26 - 17,34). St. Patrick does not and can not save us. And in this sense we do not need Patrick. We believe in Jesus. We are baptized into Jesus.

BUT: could you imagine a conversation like this taking place? Jesus calls, say Matthew, to be first his student or disciple, then His messenger or apostle. And Matthew replies, "Ok, but on one condition. You must first fire Peter and Andrew, James and John". The idea is absurd! If Matthew wanted and needed Jesus he'd have to welcome Peter and Andrew as well. If we need Jesus as Saviour, then with Jesus we welcome Patrick because Patrick is in Him.

However, thanks to Easter, Ascension, Pentecost and holy baptism, we are now closer to Jesus than were the twelve disciples during their student days. We are not just followers of Jesus trailing along behind Him. We are parts of Christ, members of Christ, in Christ. Christ is in us. He fills us with His Spirit.

So we cannot say to Jesus, "OK, but on one condition. First you must fire Patrick and all the saints". In His Body Christ unifies all who are in Him. In a sense Patrick is bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, inbreathed by the same living Spirit of God. It will not do to dismiss Patrick as a dead Irishman (or a dead Welshman).

In another sense then, that good and devout evangelical lady was wrong. St. Paul to the baptized believers, to the saints, in the city of Corinth might have been writing specially to her: "The body is one and has many organs. If the whole body were hearing, where were the smelling? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? The eye can not say to the hand, 'I have no need of thee'. The hand cannot say to the feet, 'I have no need of thee'. God hath set each organ in the body as it hath pleased Him" (12,12ff). St. Paul might not be amused to hear that lady say to St. Patrick, "I don't need you, or any of the others".

Of course limited as we are we cannot know all about all the saints. Revelation tells us they are "a multitude which can not be counted" (7,7). But saints' days, patronal festivals, relics, icons, statues, windows, remind us of some of the saints, not least of St Patrick the national patron of Ireland; above all of the obscure mum and housewife who is only remembered because of her famous Son.

Our all sufficient Saviour has made us one body in Him, the holy catholic and apostolic church, the unity together of all baptized believers, the communion of saints, the whole company of heaven with whom we sing, "Holy, holy, holy".

Colossians 3/3: "Your life is hidden with Christ in God".

Ephesians 2,6: "God raised us up with Christ and made us to sit with Christ in the heavenly places".

Therefore I believe in, I rejoice in, the communion of saints.

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