



Br Stuart for Epiphany 3 (2021)

One of the now familiar London landmarks is a huge Ferris wheel - the London Eye – on the South Bank of the Thames near Waterloo Station.

When we aren't in lockdown there are always long queues of people waiting to part with a small fortune for the privilege of a ride on the wheel to see the sights of London.

Walking along the Embankment from Westminster Bridge towards it one can observe what is going on in some of the pods as they approach the end of their ride. Each pod seems to be a world of its own, and its passengers quite oblivious of what's going on in the other pods; some groups are straining to see every detail of the view as it unfolds, others have seen enough and look bored – children are playing, lovers cuddling...yet all are part of the London Eye.

...and it struck me that, as we come towards the end of this Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity, that the London Eye is an image of the Church.

There is one Church – the mystical body of Christ – just as there is one Ferris wheel called the London Eye. The many 'pods' on the wheel represent the many denominations. As in the pods, in each of the denominations or congregations the members tend to be wrapped up in their own affairs and most of the time unaware of the life going on in the others...yet all are part of the one Church – the one mystical body of Christ.

For a long time the ecumenical concern has been to bring together the various denominations at an institutional level, but more recently the stress has been on waking up to the realisation that Christ is not an institution but a person, a 'Life', and that, in the deepest sense, we are already one in him. As Paul says, 'We are the body of Christ'.

It is a case of growing more and more aware of the unity we already have, despite the different institutions; to live the Christ-life we have in common gives a very different perspective on the unity we pray for.

Living the Christ-life can generate a huge impatience and frustration with institutional structures and so on, but it can and does also lead to enormously enriching friendships, partnerships and co-operation...and, sometimes, even to a love and compassion for those sisters and brothers who have the task of managing the institutions.

We need to pray both for the increasing awareness of the unity we already have in Christ AND ENJOY IT, because JOY IS WHERE GOD HAPPENS! --- and pray for the inspiration and imagination that will transform the denominational structures to reflect and celebrate that unity.

And this is where we have to change gear and rather than see the pods on the Ferris wheel as the different denominations each busy with its own affairs, and begin to see the pods as ourselves and each other – each wrapped up as we so often are in our own affairs.

Jesus takes water – the very ordinary basic element of life - and transforms it. It's not easy to recognise and accept that this is what he is doing to our lives – to the sheer ordinariness and muddle and frustrations of our lives, which are inextricable caught up in the divine life of the great, divine Ferris wheel.

Our part, our prayer, is to become increasingly aware of this – which is, after all, the essence of the contemplative life.

We may feel like independent 'pods' a lot of the time, but the reality is that we are all interdependent, and our life in community underlines this.

Christ's task is to take the water of our ordinary, mundane lives and transform it into the life-giving wine of the kingdom – not for our own satisfaction, but in order to enrich the lives of others as Jesus did; to help them open to the underlying truth that, in Christ, we are all one and belong to one another – wherever and whoever we are – and need to have a care for one another.

St Benedict would have us listen to each other – to 'listen carefully with the ear of the heart' – which means giving, not one tenth of our attention as in the Old Testament 'tythe' we heard about in the first lesson, but giving the whole of our attention, actually wanting to hear each other and being willing to be changed as we respond to what we hear; to listen carefully in conversation – rather than assume we know what the other is going to say; to listen carefully, not least to the readings in the Oratory that we have heard so often, and as we chant the Offices, as we do day in day out, and notice the meaning so that we don't sing like a computer but with meaning; to listen carefully to the others with the ear of our heart so that the way we sing expresses that deep unity we have in Christ.

"Get real," you may be thinking... and, of course, in order to be free to want to really hear each other, to listen carefully with the ear of the heart, each of us has the need of healing – of our deep fears and anxieties, our disappointments, resentments, hurts and angers – and this is the healing work of the Holy Spirit whose courtesy tends to invite rather than demand our co-operation.

So, growing in unity within each one of us, thus enabling the growth of unity amongst us, which in turn feeds into the realization of the unity of the whole mystical body of Christ 'that the world may believe', that the water of human life – our life - may be transformed into the wine of the kingdom.