

40 Days of Fitness

A daily devotional by Rev Garry Hardingham

DAY 24 – The Sacramental Church?

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. Ephesians 3:7-10

In its statement called “*Dogmatic constitution of the church*”, Vatican II (1962-65) states “*the church in Christ is in the nature of a sacrament, a sign, an instrument that is of communion with God and of unity among all men. Those, who in faith, look towards Jesus, the author of salvation, God has gathered together and established the church that it may be, for each and everyone, the visible sacrament of this saving unity. Christ sent his life-giving Spirit upon His disciples and through Him, his body, which is the church. The church is the universal sacrament of salvation.*” This word ‘sacrament’ here is a Latin word ‘sacramentum’ and it comes from the context of an individual soldier making a sacred oath to the commander of his unit. There is no such word in the New Testament as sacrament. The Greek word is *μυστήριον* (mysterion), mystery.

In the New Testament, the word *μυστήριον* describes the hidden plan of God which is now being revealed in Christ. Paul speaks about this hidden plan, the economy, in Eph 3:9, 1Cor 2:7-8. The mystery which is now revealed, the *μυστήριον*, is, according to Paul, that in Christ gentiles are now heirs to the promise of God to Israel. That the new Israel, the church, is in fact the purpose of creation.

That is, the fulfillment of the covenant between God and Israel coincides with the incorporation of gentiles into God's kingdom. That is the purpose of creation. That's the purpose of the economy of salvation. That not only Jews, but all humanity will be included in the body of Christ.

And so the gentile mission of Paul is not some idiosyncratic idea that he dreamed up. He didn't sit down one day and say, “Wouldn't it be a great to have gentiles in the church?” From the perspective of the New Testament, the gentile mission is the fulfillment of the economy of salvation which stretches back to creation and which will be fulfilled, according to Paul, in the inclusion finally of Israel into this church (Romans 9-11). This is the secret purpose of God revealed in Christ.

But, is Vatican II right? Is the church the sacrament (the mystery)? In the language of the reformers, i.e. Luther and Calvin, this description that the church as a sacrament, is not found. Luther proposed, for example, that the word *sacrament*, because it means *mystery*, because it means the fulfillment of God's purpose, be reserved for Christ alone. Christ alone is the mystery of God's presence in the world.

This is not an argument about whether Protestants reject sacraments. After all, the Basis of Union of the UCA urges its ministers to study the *Scots' Confession* which, in its chapter 21, clearly speaks of the central nature of Baptism and Communion as sacraments of the church and that the sacraments must be understood in relation to the presence of Christ in His Word. (I'm sure all of our ministers and pastors have read the Scot's Confession...quiz them sometime).

The argument is whether the very actions of the church are sacramental or whether it is God's action in and through Jesus as He redeems ALL humanity that is sacramental (mysterious). I'm on the side of the latter. But, we will explore this further tomorrow.

PRAYER

Redeemer God,
While we choose those who are like us,
You choose all people.
You don't discriminate by culture or creed.
Instead you call all sinners unto You,
So that all may be save.
May we be blessed in the mystery of Your salvation
And find comfort that no-one is beyond Your Grace. Amen.