

*'That they all may
be one'*



A Liturgy of Peace *reflections on the Malabar Rite*

Jesus left us the sacrament of his body and blood to be the source and continuous assurance of our union with him and our unity with one another. How is it then that we block the way of approach for one another, blaspheming the Lord of that Unity which we throw back in his face? Children of the same family refuse to eat at the same table, turn each other away. Small wonder Jesus went forth to die for us with prayer for the unity of his followers in his heart. (John 17: 11; 21-23).

The liturgies that have come down to us from the earliest days of the Church tell the same story in their recurring pleas for 'the peace of the whole world, the welfare of the holy churches of God and the unity of all . . .'. The Eastern Churches have never ceased using these words in their litanies, nor could or should they have done. Perhaps they are the thread that has held us all back from falling into utter disintegration.

The unity that Christ won for us was at an incredible cost – nothing less than the life-blood of the Son of God. We cannot come into our inheritance without sharing the cost. Though victory is already achieved, the battle is still being waged – against the divisive forces of evil – down here, until the end of time. We must want to play our part, refusing to be drawn into the pseudo-battles of recrimination and condemnation of fellow-Christians, which in reality are the tactics of the real, common enemy (the devil himself) to draw us away from our unity in Christ. Our chief weapons are genuine prayer and faithful participation in the sacrament of the Eucharist in our own church setting, with minds and hearts open to all who in any degree

profess themselves Christians, and who claim that they too eat at the Lord's table. This is the fellowship of love, and love is unity.

It isn't enough to pray for unity on and off, one week a year in the unity octave, or when we happen to think of it. Our whole life should be an act of penitence and a prayer of petition for the unity of all. The compilers of the old liturgies knew this. Such prayer, for them, was the warp and woof of the liturgical texts. We find this to be very vividly so in what is known as the Malabar Rite – originating among the 'Thomas Christians' in South West India (part of the Syrian and Jacobite tradition dating back to the very early years of the Christian era). The text as we have it now shows marks of late 16th century revision due to Portuguese Roman Catholic influences but much of the original remains.

The theme of unity and peace recurs consistently, like a harmonious melody bringing with it the actual peace it seeks to articulate. The very opening of the liturgy, acting as a sort of invitatory leading into the recitation of the Our Father, breathes already this spirit of peace:

Priest: *Glory to God in the highest.*

Deacon: *Amen.*

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Priest & Deacon: *And on earth peace and a good hope to men . . .*

Moreover, this opening dialogue already gives a hint of the quality of the peace we are being drawn into. It is cosmic – peace on *earth*, not simply momentarily in our hearts and feelings. That is Christ's offer. In fact there are three levels of prayer for peace and unity in the Malabar Rite, the cosmic that we are speaking of, the more personal and localised, ie peace between people and in their hearts and, thirdly, harmony in the Churches. We will look at these three in turn, though obviously there will be overlappings. Firstly, then, the cosmic, or as the text reads: 'Peace in creation'.

As in the Eastern liturgies generally, it is not long before deacon and people join together in a litany of intercession, addressing both the Father (*of mercies and God of all Consolation*) and the Son (*Our Saviour, the Dispenser of our salvation, and the Captain of all things*). The opening petition is, not at all surprisingly, a plea for peace, in the world and in the Church, as we have seen to be normative in the ancient texts. World and Church are intimately bound together – the effects of conflict and disharmony, as of peace and concord, work throughout undaunted by any apparent demarcation lines. But ‘world’ is mentioned here first since the Church is *in* the world *for* world. Prayer, then, is offered for the creation itself before the specific needs of the Church are recalled.

“*We beseech thee*”, the deacon prays:

For the peace and unity and well-being of the whole world, and of all Churches.

(People: *O our Lord have mercy upon us.*)

For the healthfulness of the air, the richness of year and its provisions, and the beauty of the whole world

(People: *O our Lord. . .*)

For our holy Fathers, Our Patriarch . . . et al

And so the long and detailed intercession proceeds. Meanwhile the priest blesses the chalice and paten, and the sacred gifts of bread and wine are placed on the Holy Table, the Altar. Then the *Virgin Mary, the Mother of Christ* is commemorated, together with the Apostle Thomas, the martyrs and all the faithful departed – all these are invoked, but briefly. The college of the Apostles alone is specifically asked to *pray*, and, significantly, *not* for the well-being of the Church but for the cosmos itself:

Priest: *Be there a commemoration upon the holy Altar of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Christ.*

Deacon: *From everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.* *Apostles of the very Son, friends of the Only-Begotten,* **PRAY YE THAT THERE MAY BE PEACE IN THE CREATION.**

Priest : *Let all the people say Amen and Amen.*

*Be thy commemoration, Apostle Thomas, our holy father, upon
the holy Altar . . . together with the martyrs . . . all the faithful who have fallen
asleep . . .*

Such a prayer, at such a point, seems to be profoundly significant. Creation itself must be deeply at peace to receive the mystery about to be enacted. Creatures of the natural world, in the form of bread and wine, are to be taken and blessed to become the very body and blood of the Creator Himself, incarnate – in **human** form (of the earth, earthy).

And so the liturgy continues, building up towards this climax. The catechumens are bidden to depart, the Epistle and Gospel read and more prayers are made, especially that the Holy Spirit might descend upon the gifts about to be offered. Then the priest asks the prayers of the other sacred ministers on his behalf. Their prayer in response emphasises again that the Eucharistic sacrifice is offered not simply for our own personal or local needs but on behalf of all creation. “*May Christ*”, the Ministers say to the priest:

*. . . be well-pleased with this sacrifice which thou offerest for thyself, for us,
and for all the world, from the least to the greatest . . .*

And so, on to the Eucharistic prayer proper, enshrining the consecration of the gifts and prayer for the blessing of the Spirit upon them. The priest asks that they might be offered for the needs of all, especially the poor, the sick and the suffering. Enfolded in this all-embracing prayer there is, yet again, a plea for universal peace:

*Give peace to us and tranquillity all the days of our life . . . Yea,, O Lord, give
us peace, that all the inhabitants of the earth may know that thou art God,
the only Father of truth . . .*

The peace of the world and of the Church are again seen as being intimately bound together:

... sow in us, my Lord, charity and mutual unity of soul; and guard thy holy Catholic Church here and everywhere, from everything noxious, from all fault and perturbation, by thy grace and love for ever.

Such a prayer **can** only be granted by God's grace. **We** are powerless to effect it, as our centuries of division make only too clear. Thus it is not at all surprising that our liturgies should be found begging God to receive the consecrated sacrifice for the peace and unity of the Church. The Malabar Rite is no exception. Shortly after the consecration the priest exclaims:

Thanks be to thee, Lord God of Hosts: let this oblation be received for the whole Catholic Church...

But that isn't the end of the matter. It is to be received as well: '*for priests and princes; for the poor also that are oppressed, in sorrow and misery, and for the faithful departed...*' The plea and cry for peace and unity is not only for the worldwide church and the creation at large but for each one of us in our poverty and sinfulness. We too need integration, or how else could the Church ever show forth its own integrity to the world, and that world be at peace? The Malabar Rite remembers the individual.

We have seen hints of this already but there are other instances as well. After the reading of the Gospel and the reciting of the Creed the priest prays secretly for the gathering together of his people:

Glory be to thee, Finder of them that were lost: glory be to thee, Collector of them that are dispersed, and Bringer-back of them that are afar off: glory to thee who convertest the erring to the knowledge of the truth. Glory to thee my Lord...

And a little later, just before the start of the Eucharistic Prayer, the deacon assures the people that the priest is at prayer on **their** behalf, for their peace and well-being. They must in turn co-operate, recollecting their dispersed attention as the climax of the liturgy approaches:

The priest is praying that by his intercession peace may be multiplied in you: cast your eyes down to the ground, and vigilantly take care to raise your mind to heaven; seek and petition at this time, and let no one venture to speak; and he that prayeth, let him pray mentally, while he remaineth in silence and fear. Peace be with us.

Likewise, and even more emphatically the deacon addresses the people just before communion:

*Let us cleanse our consciences from division and contention;
Let our souls be thoroughly perfect, both from all hatred and malice to others.*

Let us receive sanctity, and be inflamed by the Holy Ghost.

Let us receive the fellowship of the Divine Mysteries in unanimity of mind and mutual peace.

And may it be, O Lord, to us for the resurrection of our bodies, and the salvation of our souls, and the life that is to ages of ages. Amen.

And after communion, as part of a beautiful prayer for holiness of life in all who have partaken of the sacred gifts, the deacon prays:

Grant, my Lord, that the ears which have heard the voice of thy songs, may never hear the voice of clamour and dispute . . . that the tongues which have sung "Holy, Holy, Holy", may speak the truth . . . (and) the bodies which have tasted thy living Body may be restored in newness of life . . . Let thy great love remain with us . . .

Communion with Jesus **must** mean fellowship, love, and peace with one another even though we have made it hard to come by. That is why we have to keep on repenting and praying, from

one Eucharist to another, hanging on to God's mercy by a thread. Maybe, also, that is why the long blessing at the conclusion of the Malabar Rite contains these words:

The Lord that sitteth in heaven, give us a quiet peace, a good and sweet peace, that we may rejoice day and night.

He give you peaceful times, that we may ever rejoice and not be turbulent and unquiet, but loving each other through charity.

And since ye are assembled together this day, in the solemnity of this oblation may the Cross of the Celestial King guard you . . .

There is our answer: peace in our hearts; unity in the Church through a shared common table; wholeness in creation with war at an end? – how else but in and through the Cross of our Lord. Let us take up our own and follow.