

YOU HAVE BEEN BROUGHT NEAR

Trinity VII

Baptism, Confirmation and Installation of a Parish Clerk within the Holy Eucharist

St. Michael's, Cornhill

Sunday, July 19th 2015

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The village of Butiama lies about thirty miles to the east of Lake Victoria and about one hundred miles to the west of the Serengeti National Park in the north of Tanzania, perhaps fifty miles south of the Kenyan border. In many ways it is a typical East African village with a mixture of grass and mud houses and crudely built brick dwellings. It is, however, in another sense, entirely differently from any other Tanzanian village. For Butiama is both the birthplace and burial place of Julius Nyerere who is variously known as the *mwalimu* (the teacher) and also the 'Father of the nation.' There is a modest, understated mausoleum, which houses his mortal remains, and a fairly primitive museum to his memory.

Now. . . the more senior among us will remember Nyerere. He was one of the outstanding African leaders of that first generation after independence – honest, inspired and at heart always a peacemaker. He was an early embracer of intermediate technology and a visionary leader. He was no economist, however, and Tanzania still suffers because of that. Nonetheless he took a vast tract of East Africa which had been carved out with arbitrary boundaries drawn as the German colonists saw fit – and indeed, where the British and Portuguese had left off – in modern Kenya, Zimbabwe or Mozambique.

Nyerere helped mould and nurture a new nation. He did so out of the reservoirs of his profound Christian faith, for throughout his life, he was a devout Roman Catholic. How, then, might his faith have affected him, how did it motivate him to do all this? Well, our three readings give us something of a clue, for it was a sense of solidarity which led Nyerere's vision.

From the Old Testament, this morning, we heard Jeremiah's prophecy. At one point he writes, putting his words into the mouth of God: 'Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock, out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold. . . I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them.' Nyerere was but one such 'shepherd' carrying his tiny *fimbo* or mace, the symbol of his leadership, under his arm.

Then again from the Letter to the Ephesians, we heard these words: 'But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one.'

Again it is a vision of a new humanity, united by God into a new nature, powered by God's grace. *Solidarity* was a theme that St. Paul explored again and again. It was the coming of Christ – his passion, death and resurrection – that made possible this solidarity, this new humanity. We are redeemed not as individuals, but as one human race. We become, as St. Paul put it, *in Christ*.

The more senior among us will remember the struggle of the Polish people for a renewed nationhood in the 1980s. Lech Walesa, their revolutionary leader, took them forward under the banner of *Solidarnosc*, Solidarity. Again it was his Christian faith that powered his vision. Finally, in our gospel passage, we read of Jesus, teaching and healing: ' . . . he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.' Again the image of one fold is implicit in the evangelist's writing.

But what might this have to say to us this morning in this most compendious rite? It would be hard to have brought together many more components. For we shall baptise, we shall confirm, we shall install John Bowman as Parish Clerk – and all of this comes within

the wider enfolding of the Holy Eucharist. In the eucharist, we rehearse the mystery of our redemption, the bringing of all humanity into solidarity *in Christ*, as Paul so often puts it.

So, then, this morning Gemma becomes one with Christ – she is baptised into Christ Jesus. Drowned in the font (well not quite...) she goes down into the tomb with Christ, then to be raised *in Christ*. Both Patrick and Gemma will then be confirmed. That completes their ‘coming into Christ’ with anointing and the laying on of hands. The anointing, like that of kings and queens, sees God crowning our humanity.

Then, late in this service, in a very brief rite, I shall install John as a Parish Clerk here to serve alongside Paul Pritchett and Rupert Meacher. John will be called to a particular shepherding role within this church, this community, this tiny corner of Christ’s redeemed humanity. But everything also happens within the Holy Eucharist. In the eucharist, the Mass, whatever one might call it, we experience our *communion* with each other and with God as we come and meet ‘around his table’. We are one with Christ Jesus and one.

Now in case I leave you too much lost in a theological world, let’s return to where I began. Julius Nyerere was someone, one might say, who was even of some considerable holiness. Drawn into conflict to drive the tyrannous, genocidal invading Idi Amin out of his country, he always retained a commitment to peace. His faith gave shape to his vision. So it will be as Gemma and Patrick prepare for their marriage – today in Christ their future has been shaped. John as Parish Clerk will work with God in Christ too. So back to our second reading: ‘Once you were far off but now you have been brought near by the blood of Christ – for he is our peace.’
Amen.

Readings

Jeremiah. 23. 1-6.

Ephesians. 2. 11-end.

Mark. 6. 30-34, 53-end.