

Who's We?

[Preached in the Seminex Chapel, September 23, 1977]

In a moment we shall again strike up the Te Deum, the fourth time this week, as if to make a point, the point being: “You are God, we praise you.” But who is the “we”? “You are the Lord, we acclaim you.” “We acclaim you”—we who? Granted, that is hardly the point of the Te Deum, which after all is directed toward God, not toward us. For isn't it the purpose in prayers of this kind, prayers of adoration, to give visibility to the One being adored and not to the adorers? Isn't our role rather to lose ourselves in praise of Him and for once to forget about ourselves? Yes, that is all true. But then why does the Te Deum, this paradigm of Christian adoration, have almost as many lines about those who do the adoring as it does about the God they adore?

In short, isn't the Te Deum a bit too self-conscious, not to say self-centered? Especially so, when you consider what self-congratulatory things we adorers are here made to sing about ourselves. It's not enough that “we”, little old we, claim to be doing all this praising and acclaiming. What is more, look at the prestigious accompaniment we claim is providing our back-up: “all angels, all the powers of heaven, cherubim and seraphim,” “heaven and earth,” “the glorious company of apostles,” “the noble fellowship of prophets,” “the white-robed army of martyrs,” “the holy church throughout the world.” We have trouble enough believing whether all these celestial characters even exist, let alone whether they can sing, and now we have the nerve to pretend that they are all tuned in on us here in this obscure corner on...what's the name of the street? Such reckless boasting especially from such fickle believers does add an uncertain note to our adorations, doesn't it, particularly in view of who is listening? One way to keep from worrying about such distracting questions, I find, is to concentrate instead on the notes and then sing by all means loudly.

“We praise you”—who is “we”? Why, “the holy church,” says the Te Deum, that's who. “Holy church,” we? Then how do we explain – not merely to one another but to “You, O Lord” – why we are separate from so many others in that church? If we truly are the holy church, why are we making our adorations in this far-away place all by ourselves, separate not only from the Baptists across the way, not only from the Jesuits down the street, not only from the store-front congregations all around – against all those we at least hold no grudge – but separate also from thousands of Missouri Synod sisters and brothers whom we were most

immediately expected to do our adoring with? Oh, I can explain that to you (and I can document it): they rejected us. But what I have to explain to Him – don't you, too? – is why I have come more and more to enjoy being rejected by them. That does make it a little harder to look Him in the face and sing "Te Deum". Of course I can always cover up my separatism by singing more loudly.

"We acclaim you" – who is "we"? Why, "the holy church" along with "the glorious company of apostles." Really? If we do keep such glorious company as that, how is it that we cannot keep even the company of one another here at Seminex but instead go on losing members from this company? I am not now talking of those members we are losing numerically, whether faculty or students. That subject is too painful to talk about, ironically, even here in our prayers. No. I am talking rather of those recent alumni of ours – maybe I've run into more of them than my share recently – who are out there trying hard not to resent the way we have lost touch with them now (as one of them said) "you don't seem to need us anymore." These young "apostles" especially the more beleaguered and not so "glorious" ones, I for one have pretty well let slip from this "company", haven't you? But then how glorious and apostolic is this company of ours, really, here marshaled for adoration?

"We praise you" – who is "we"? Why, "the holy church" together with "the noble fellowship of prophets." The "prophets" yet! But the I am reminded of one...you might call him a kind of a prophet. He is a salty old Christian patriarch. He is seated among you this morning. He happens to be my dad. Tonite we are going to celebrate his ninetieth birthday. Next to him on the bench is a young...you might call her a kind of a prophetess. She is merely eighty-five. We are also going to celebrate their 65th wedding anniversary. Now that is indeed something to sing a Te Deum about. Yet, as I do that, I remember somehow that these two "prophets" made it this far not always because of their kids but often in spite of them, at least in spite of this kid. Maybe your experience is similar. What does that do to our Te Deum – in "the noble fellowship of prophets"? When in doubt, Bertram, beef up the volume.

Who is "we"? I am almost sorry I raised the question. But now that the question is out, maybe the only thing left to do as a last desperate resort is to brag about the one halfway decent thing we still have to show for: our praising, our acclaiming. That we do rather well, don't we, and doesn't that at least make us look good and sound good? Sound good to whom? Remember who it is who is listening: the One who, as we recalled on Wednesday,

desires mercy and not sacrifice? But after all, we may reply, just listen to our canticle; listen to the compliments we pay him. Doesn't that say something about us, something nice? Perhaps what it says is, Where do we get the right to take such liberties with the deity? For compliments can be a way of manipulating even a human person, most of all when the compliments get excessively intimate and personal. You don't just walk up to Doctor Sauer, say, and commend him on the internal relations of his family life or compliment him on the private details of his son's birth. But that is what we do with God in the Te Deum. Where do we get the right to such intimacies, "we" being who we are?

There, that is a good question: not the question now, Who is "we", but the question rather, Where do we get the right? How dare we sing Te Deums, and so loudly? For that question the Te Deum has its own daring answer: "You became man to set us free." He became one of our "we"? The we who have trouble even believing in him, let alone believing in cherubim, the we who relish being rid of other sisters and brothers of his, the we who alienate our own young apostles and shorten the lives of our old prophets, the we who assume we are doing God a favor with our metaphysical compliments – are these the we to whom he says, Move over, I am joining you? These are the we, and he is our right to sing out, even quite loudly.

The daring answer continues: "You did not spurn the virgin's womb." One of our girls? One of ours. And notice, not a word about how this Virgin's Birth is proof of his omnipotence or proof of his purity. No, it is a word rather about his lowliness. "He did not spurn the virgin's womb." He did not consider even that beneath him. Low as she was, as low as we, he could stoop that low. He must be mighty omnipotent and awfully pure to be able to get that close to us, that down to earth.

Speaking of "earth", I am reminded of a particular spot on that earth, Remesiana – in the Serbian sector of present-day Yugoslavia. Last Easter I attended a philosophers' conference not far from there, and was struck by the bleakness of the landscape. Parts of it looked almost like a moonscape. It was in that neighborhood where the Te Deum is supposed to have originated, with Nicotas of Remesiana, who evidently was able to sing, "the whole earth is full of your glory" – even Remesiana. Now, having looked again at the Te Dum and at whose glory it is which fills the earth, I can understand also why you sing about those humble diggings of ours as well: "the whole earth is full of his glory."

“You overcame the sting of death.” And we know, don’t we, thanks to Saint Paul, what “the sting of death” is: not just the crown of thorns or the nails or the spear or the cross. What makes all these so piercing, what makes our deaths so fatal is that we have them coming to us. “The sting of death,” says Paul, is sin. Do you mean that the “king of glory, the eternal Son of the Father,” this man-becomer, this non-spurner got himself mixed up even in that – in our unbelief, our separatism, our callousness toward our own prophets and apostles, our blasé liturgical name-dropping? Why, that must have killed him to do that. As the Te Deum says, “bought with the price of your own blood.”

We “bought” and paid for? Even this worship service of ours, this mixed-motivated, overly self-conscious, half-gradging, clock-watching adoration of ours? You mean that he takes that, too, and says “I’ll buy that”? And those differences among us which are threatening this community, so threatening that they dare not surface even in our intercessions, or the distress you may be feeling over the fact that I even mention them at all – does he take that sin, too, and say “I’ll sign for that”? You know he does. And what does he do with those sins, that “sting of death”? He “overcame” them. Because he did, so can we. Please, brothers and sisters, help me believe that.

Then what is left to say except “Come then Lord, and help your people, bought with the price of your own blood, and bring us with your saints to glory everlasting”? “With your saints”, the same saints we alienate and neglect and spurn – bring us, Lord, with them. What is left except to sing out? Right. Not alone, though, but “with your saints.” If it happens to be your style to do that loudly, great, so long as it is not so loud that you cannot still hear the other saints – not just your brothers on the bench there but your sisters, too, not just the saints who are here this morning but also those who used to be here and aren’t anymore, even those who would refuse ever to set foot in this place. The entire noble fellowship, the glorious company, the whole motley crew. All of you, get lost – in him!

Take it away, Martha.

Robert W, Bertram
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