

SAN DIEGO
LUTHERAN / ANGLICAN / ROMAN CATHOLIC DIALOGUE

DAY OF DIALOGUE 2018
“GOD FORMS A PEOPLE: A NEW MOSAIC”

BROKEN SHARDS FORM A PORTRAIT OF CHRIST:
THE UNITY THAT ONLY GOD CAN GIVE

PAUL G. BIEBER, STS, PASTOR
ALL SAINTS LUTHERAN CHURCH OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

JANUARY 20, 2018

The theme for this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, from the Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute is, "Your Right Hand, O Lord, Glorious in Power," from the Song of Moses and Miriam, Exodus 15:6. The Graymoor Institute's emphasis on God's determination to form a people of his own inspired our San Diego Lutheran/Anglican/Roman Catholic dialogue group to select the title for today's event: God Forms A People: A New Mosaic. It falls to me to provide a theological approach to the concept of the People of God as it relates to the issue of immigration, to explore what theological freight this image of a mosaic will carry.

Most of this day focuses on what we have done, are doing, are called to do. But the call for theological reflection is a call to think about what God has done, is doing, will yet do. But this is very difficult to discern in the moment. We all have a tendency to create gods in our own image, and it is only as the true God reveals himself in human history—which we see only in hindsight, that we can see what he *has done*. For what he will yet do, we can only trust his promise.

I

The Original People of God: Israel

The People of God: In the first instance this is, of course, Israel. The Song of Moses and Miriam praises the Lord for the Exodus: "In your mercy you led forth the people you set free."¹ The right hand of God has acted to set his people free from Egyptian servitude and bring them to the

¹*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis and Philadelphia: Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, 1978), Canticle 19.

land of promise. When they come to the promised land, the People of God will live by his *torah*, his instruction. Two of its provisions are illuminating for us today. First, Leviticus 19:33–34, the first reading from our prayer service this morning:

³³ When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong.

³⁴ The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.²

And, second, just a few verses before, Leviticus 19:18:

You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.³

God's people are to love the sojourner and the neighbor. Both of these commands are part of God's instruction for his people.

When God formed his people Israel, he took the children of Jacob who had gone down into Egypt in the time of Joseph, brought them out of slavery, and placed them in the land of promise. Their life together was to reflect the justice, compassion, and mercy of their God. When they failed in this, God caused them to be driven into Babylonian captivity, but promised to return them to their own land. The God who formed a people in the crisis of the Exodus re-formed this people in the crisis of exile and return.

II

Church as the People of God

When Christian ecumenists employ the image of the People of God, our primary referent is not Israel but the church. It was the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the

²Leviticus 19:33–34, The Revised Standard Version (1971).

³Leviticus 19:18, The Revised Standard Version. (1971).

Church, *Lumen Gentium*, that brought this image of the church into contemporary theological currency. While Israel was the People of God as a nation among other nations, *Lumen Gentium* points out that the church is different:

[T]hough there are many nations there is but one people of God, which takes its citizens from every race, making them citizens of a kingdom which is of a heavenly rather than of an earthly nature. All the faithful, scattered though they be throughout the world, are in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit. . . . Since the kingdom of Christ is not of this world the Church or people of God in establishing that kingdom takes nothing away from the temporal welfare of any people. On the contrary it fosters and takes to itself, insofar as they are good, the ability, riches and customs in which the genius of each people expresses itself. . . . This characteristic of universality which adorns the people of God is a gift from the Lord Himself.⁴

When God forms his people the church, he includes the faithful of every nation. As God reminded the Israelites that he had not chosen them because they were the greatest of nations, and as Jesus came not for the healthy who need no repentance but for sick sinners, just so God forms a people not only from the “good, the ability, riches and customs . . . of each people,” but from the last, the lost, the least, and the little ones of this world, those who are strangers and pilgrims in this world.

In reflecting on Vatican II’s use of the concept of the People of God to describe the church, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger wrote:

In 1939, the Lutheran exegete Ernst Käsemann entitled his monograph on the Letter to the Hebrews *Das wandernde Gottesvolk* (The Pilgrim People of God). This title became, quite frankly, a slogan within the context of the conciliar debates, because it suggested something that, over the course of the struggle to draft the Constitution on the Church, was being realized ever more clearly: Church is not yet at her destination. She still has her authentic hope ahead of her. The “eschatological” moment of the concept of Church became clear. Most importantly, in this way one could express the unity of salvation history, which embraces Israel and the Church together on their pilgrim way. Thus one could express the historicity of the Church, which is on the way and will become thoroughly herself only when the paths down through the ages have been traversed and end in God’s hands. It was possible also to

⁴*Lumen Gentium*, 13.

express the inner unity of the People of God, in which . . . all are . . . pilgrims in the one communion of the pilgrim People of God. Therefore, to summarize using catchphrases that express the outstanding elements of the “People of God” concept that were important to the Council, we could say that the historical character of the Church becomes evident here, the unity of the history of God with men, the inner unity of the People of God that transcends the boundaries even of the sacramental states of life, the eschatological dynamic, the provisional nature and brokenness of the Church, which is always in need of renewal, and finally the ecumenical dimension as well, that is, the various ways in which being joined and related to the Church are possible and real, even beyond the confines of the Catholic Church.⁵

As ecumenists, we can celebrate this ecumenical usefulness of the People of God concept. Even as we live with the imperfect communion that subsists between our communities of faith, we can rejoice in the inner unity that God gives to the people he gathers. But more significant is the way the notion of the People of God embraces the roles of Israel and the church in salvation history. The God who formed his people Israel to be a nation of priests and a light to the nations also formed his church to continue the same mission. The church was formed in the crisis of crucifixion, as the dying Jesus commended his mother and the beloved disciple to one another, and given its mission to all nations by the risen Jesus. The church exists to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to all nations in word and deed. But since the church is not a nation among other nations, as was Israel, the question arises: How shall God’s people live among the nations?

III

The People of God and Other Peoples

This question was answered already in the mid-Second Century *Epistle to Diognetus*, an artifact of the pre-Constantinian era that speaks eloquently to our post-Constantinian era of the way the earliest church related to the nations in which believers found themselves:

⁵Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Endeavors in Ecclesiology*, M. J. Miller, Trans. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 25.

[T]he Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.

To sum up all in one word— what the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, yet is not of the body; and Christians dwell in the world, yet are not of the world.⁶

IV

The Reconciling People of God

A people who regard themselves as strangers and sojourners even in their native countries, yet live there as citizens, sharing in all things with their neighbors, are well-placed to pursue the mission they have received from their risen Lord, to be a reconciled community, an effective sign of how to live in a broken world.

⁶from Chapters V and VI of *The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*.

In our ecumenical gatherings, we often speak of reconciliation in the context of bridging the divisions among churches and ecclesial communities. We, however, live in a time of much deeper fragmentation, and our topic today is one of the most neuralgic issues that divide our country. Even in our state of impaired communion vis-a-vis one another in a broken church, we are called, in the words of Cardinal Ratzinger, “to express the inner unity of the People of God . . . the one communion of the pilgrim People of God.” This inner unity is the reconciliation we have received from God, of which we have been called to be ambassadors.

The Epistle to Diognetus says that “what the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world.” Would that it were so in our fragmented country today. Would that the church could serve as that community of reconciliation that could build trust among those who are not like-minded, to speak peace to those discomfited by a year of Donald Trump’s vulgar abrasiveness, and to those discomfited by eight years of Barack Obama’s tendentious hectoring; to those sojourners treated unfairly by our country’s immigration laws, and to those neighbors whose employment prospects and sense of personal safety are adversely affected by the manner in which those same immigration laws are enforced, or not.

I do not think I could use more subjunctives than I have in that paragraph. Can a broken church serve as such a reconciling community in a fragmented nation?

V

Paradox and the Eschatological Edge

As Jesus says in Matthew’s version of the story we know as “the rich young ruler,” “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”⁷ The call to theological reflection is a

⁷Matthew 19:26, The Revised Standard Version (1971).

call to think about what God has done, is doing, will yet do. For all its brokenness, the church, as *Lumen Gentium* reminds us, is “the kingdom of Christ now present in mystery”⁸ It is, as the Lutheran Theologian Robert Jenson, now of blessed memory, wrote, “the community that lives by what Christ will eschatologically make of it.”⁹

Here is where the image of the mosaic shows its ability to carry some theological freight, because a mosaic exemplifies the same paradox the church exemplifies: many broken shards are formed into a portrait—not by the shards themselves, but by one who has a vision of what the arrangement of the shards will portray. Let us think of it as a portrait of Christ, the One whose cross reconciled us to God and who, risen, commissions us as ambassadors of reconciliation.

VI

The Fragments and the Mosaic

How many broken shards there are! Does God cause flows of refugees—the massive displacements in Europe after World War II, in and from the Middle East in our day? No, human sin and the desire to dominate others displaces people who want only to live, work, and raise their families.

But waves of peoples on the move are frightening. It was a wave of Germanic migrants that brought Augustine to write *The City of God*, to posit a heavenly polity whose earthly reality is the church, whose ultimate good is peace: *tranquillitas ordinis*, the tranquility of order. It was another

⁸*Lumen Gentium* 3.

⁹Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume II: The Works of God* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 172.

wave of Teutonic and Scandinavian migrants who brought the Irish monks to labor unceasingly in their scriptoria, trying to preserve some fragments of the civilization collapsing around them.

Our country's current division is caused by neither refugees nor invaders, but by disagreement over the right response to those migrants drawn by economic opportunity and political liberty denied in their dysfunctional homelands. The burden of large-scale immigration, especially illegal immigration, falls on our poorer neighbors. Progressive Christians believe that sojourners are to be welcomed for theological and socio-political reasons. Conservative Christians see the effect of uncontrolled immigration on poor neighbors, and believe that immigration without assimilation of American values is a threat. Ironically, those Americans who unabashedly hold that our language, culture, and traditions are things worthy for immigrants to assimilate are those who hold border security as the highest value. And those who seek open borders do not hold assimilation in high esteem.

What role can a reconciling community of faith serve? With Augustine, we can recognize that God's polity of perfect peace and justice will only be realized eschatologically. With the Irish monks, we can work to hand on to future generations what we have received. But how can we ecumenists reconcile our angry, divided neighbors?

VII

Death and Resurrection

"With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." We cannot do it. What can we do now besides embracing the paradox that our best efforts to fit broken shards together in a mosaic can only be effective if guided by the Mind that sees the final portrait? Actually, the only thing that we can do is embrace the deeper paradox, that this God only works by raising the dead.

As the late Anglican theologian Robert Farrar Capon put it, God is not interested in “rewarding the rewardable, correcting the correctible, or improving the improvable,” only in raising the dead.¹⁰

For all of our well-intentioned efforts to build Jerusalem in San Diego’s somewhat brown yet still pleasant land, the coming of the New Jerusalem is in God’s hands, not ours. The pilgrim People of God follow Jesus to the cross in our present historical crisis, trusting the Father’s promise that he is doing a new thing, forming a people, precisely of the last, the lost, the least, the little ones, the pilgrims and strangers of this world. Yes, including us, pilgrims living in between cultures, societies, and traditions who trust that God will again re-form his people in this crisis. In the present, the community of those for whom Jesus died and now lives does not now know precisely what God will yet make of them. Robert Jenson asked and answered this identity question this way:

So who are the people of God? They are the historically actual and just for that reason not always unambiguously delineable people whom God’s predestining will is gathering to fulfillment in him. That the church *is* the people of God can be an exclusive proposition only eschatologically. And if we ask *how* God gathers and moves this people, we must point to *torah* in the most comprehensive sense and to the entire ensemble of institutions—in Israel, in the church, and in the synagogue—by which God has maintained the various modes and aspects of this people’s historical continuity.¹¹

That is the *torah* that calls us to love both the sojourner and the neighbor. And that historical continuity leads to the church’s eschatological moment, described for us already in the Letter to the Ephesians:

¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,

¹⁰Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 39.

¹¹Jenson, *op. cit.*, 194.

²¹ in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²² in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.¹²

And in First Peter:

⁹ [Y]ou are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.¹³

In the death of Jesus Christ humanity is negated and overcome. In his resurrection God begins to form a people, which looks uncannily like a mosaic portrait of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.

¹²Ephesians 2:19–22, The Revised Standard Version (1971)

¹³I Peter 2:9-10, The Revised Standard Version (1971)