

On Being Together: The Calling of the Church*

Churches rarely think about the origins of their identity in any kind of radical way. They mostly go about their business assuming their values, and implicitly imbibing these from one generation to the next. In a way, this is a pity, as valuable practices are often left to chance: inchoate by nature, they simply persist implicitly. Churches rarely think, for example, about how and why they welcome the strangers and aliens in their midst – mostly very easily, and without fuss or further reflection. But welcome they do: not only giving to the stranger, but also receiving from them. This is not merely an observation about how Christians engage with others who are not kith and kin; it is also a remark about the oft-hidden dynamic of reception, gift and charity. So just how revolutionary is the church? Thomas Tweed observes that they:

(Religions)...are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and supra-human (i.e., divine) forces to make homes and cross boundaries.[†]

I am rather drawn to this definition of religion, and by extension, of churches. Churches, at their best – and one presumes a passionate real faith in a real God as a basis – know that good religion, when it comes together and gathers intentionally, performs four important transformative tasks.

First, they intensify joy. They take the ordinary and make it extraordinary. They know how to celebrate lives, love and transitions. They bless what is good, and raise hope, thanks and expectation in prayer and praise. They lift an institution and individuals to a new plane of existence – one of the blessing and thankfulness for what is and can be. And they not only move, but also intensify. Just as a birth becomes even more in a baptism, so in mission and ministry does a ceremony become more with prayer and celebration.

Second, suffering is confronted. Working with pain, bereavement, counselling and consolation will be familiar to all ministers and churches – providing the safe space and expertise that holds and slowly resolves the suffering that individuals and institutions carry inside them.

Third, the making of homes is a profoundly analogical and literal reference to the function of faith. Making safe spaces of nourishment, well-being, maturity, diversity and individuation; our 'faith homes' are places both of open hospitality and security.

Fourth, faith helps us to cross boundaries – to move forward and over the challenges of life to new places. It can be crossing deserts to find promised lands; or passing from darkness to light. Religion never keeps us in one place; even with our homes, it moves us. It is in gathering that we meet the One who is present in bread and wine as we sit at table; who is there in the breaking of the bread; who makes our hearts burn as the scriptures are read. Meeting together is where we encounter Jesus Christ more richly than we can on our own. We discover the life-saving truths for the world in the radical act of our gatherings.

The *Gospel of John* seems to suggest that one of the key words or ideas to help us understand the ministry of Jesus and the subsequent blueprint for the church is that of 'abiding'.[‡] The word is linked to another English word, 'abode'. God abides with us. Christ bids us to abide in him, and he will abide in use. He bids us to make our home with him, as he has made his home with us. Christ tells us that there are many rooms in his father's house. There are many places of gathering and meeting there. And central to the notion of an abode is the concept of abiding. To abide is to 'wait patiently with'. God has abided with us. He came to us in ordinary life, and he has sat with us, eaten with us, walked with us, and lived amongst us. That is why John ends his gospel with Jesus doing ordinary things. Breaking bread; or eating breakfast on the seashore. God continues to dwell with us. He was with us the beginning; and he is with us at the end. He will not leave us. And he wants his church to abide with the world – and especially to be with all those who have no-one to be with them. The friendless, the forlorn, the forgotten – God wills us to abide with them, and with each other. Deep, abiding fellowship is God's will for creation, not just well-organised congregations.

For some time now, I have held that one of the wrong-turns we have taken in mission and ministry is that we have assumed that the church is an organisation. That it can be managed, branded, and mobilised. Add the right three-word strap-line to a church or diocese and watch it fizz and buzz. 'Committed to Growth; 'Going for Growth'; 'Empowered for Mission' – it's all there. But the church is not an organisation. It is, rather, an institution. It exists not to adapt, survive and succeed; but rather to be faithful, independent of its popularity. It may be called to martyrdom, not growth.

Of course I do think churches should be organised. But I don't think they are organisations. True, our Unique Selling Point (USP) is indeed Jesus. But our Key Performance Indicators (KPI's), and drawn from the gospels, are rather mixed. It may be an abundant harvest; it may be martyrdom. It may be conversions; but it may also be being hated by our friends and family for our faith. We are not, in other words, called to measure ourselves through metrics of popularity and growth. The only game in town is faithfulness.

It is a pity that so much of our church-focussed mission is about getting people in; but the gospel is basically about getting people out: 'go!' is one of the last words Jesus says to us. We should focus our energies on finding our communities and loving them; not on hoping they might find us, and like us long enough to stay awhile. Our misplaced sense of priorities is the problem. We often assume that the two fundamental problems confronting humanity are death and well-being; or poverty and lack. In other words, we do all we can to avoid ourselves, our communities and our churches declining; and do all we can to encourage growth.

And that is why God is Emmanuel – God is with us. He made us for company with each other, and for eternal company with him. God is with us in creation; in redemption, and finally, in heaven. God with us is how John's Prologue begins – the Word was with God; he was with us in the beginning. God is with us in Psalm 23; he is with us in light and dark, chaos and order; life and death. Jesus, in his hour of darkness, longed for the disciples to stay with him; but they fled. But the women stood by him at the cross. And in the resurrection, Jesus is again, with us – more powerfully and intensely. God is with us.

And I guess that is the question for the possibility of the church. As God is with us, can we be with each other? As God bears us all, can we bear each other? Can we truly bear the price of the church, which is togetherness; not being alone? For the possibility of the church is locked up in forsaking isolation from one another. Because togetherness, for company, and so that we should not be alone, is for what we were created.

So I want to suggest that at the heart of ministry there is a deep theological mandate. To be with one another, as God is with us; and for our church leaders not to be so much for this or that; but with us too. We don't want our bishops merely to manage decline; or to simply lead us into relative growth and prosperity. We want them to be with us, as a sign of God's total commitment to this since creation; and in redemption. He is Emmanuel; God with us.

The gospels tell us, so often, that we find Jesus, and therefore true ministry, in tough, tiring and trying places. Not necessarily at the place where we are at our freshest or best, or even most confident. But God often does meet us here. In the liminal places.

Ultimately, the shape of God's future kingdom, and of our own church, eludes us. And this is certainly true for Anglicanism – both locally, on the ground, as well as internationally, as a Communion. For all of our ecclesiology and organization, and no matter how much we might claim our churches or denominations to be born of God's nature or derived from human nurture, we need to heed Paul's injunction: 'I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Corinthians 2: 2). This is more than a declaration of some historical fact. Paul understands the crucifixion of Christ in cosmic terms: it stretches from the present to the very end of time. And so the Christ whom we know in the church – the only one we can know – is the One who was crucified and raised. But even when raised, still bears the marks of crucifixion.

The first disciples were troubled by this. They expected to see Christ manifest in some form of triumphant glory. But it was not so. The Christ who is revealed on the cross is the same who is revealed in the resurrection. The fullness of the revelation lies in the continuity. And this means that the church bears scars, wounds, pain and suffering in its ongoing life. The church – as wounded, but raised – is the body of Christ.

The glory of God, it seems, will be made manifest in our weak and powerless states, not just our strengths and gifts. We find God in differences and in conflict, as well as in consensus and communion. The glory of Anglicanism lies, ironically, partly in its dependency and its incompleteness, as well as in its reformed catholicity. It lies in its breadth and depth; a pale reflection, no less, of God's omnipresence and all-encompassing love. The true exists by incorporation – a lesson Jesus learnt in childhood, and embodied in adulthood.

So here is how one former cynic, and a journalist, wrote about the Church of England a few years ago:

Why do I love it? Let me count the ways...I love it because it is patient. It does not expect the world to change in an instant, or to be bludgeoned into belief, because it knows that certain things take centuries. I love it because it is kind. It is kind enough to welcome strangers, whatever their beliefs, and shake their hands, and offer them a coffee after church...I

like the fact that it is not arrogant or rude. I like the fact that it does not insist on its own way, but is genuinely tolerant of other religious beliefs – and none. I like the fact that it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but quietly presents an ethical framework of kindness. I like the fact that it believes in the values of the New Testament, and of St Paul's description of love, which I've just paraphrased, but also believes that it is more important to embody them than to quote them. I like the fact that it doesn't speak like a child, think like a child, or reason like a child. I like the fact that it is mature enough to value faithful doubt. I like the fact that it is calm...[§]

This may all seem like an argument – as a genre of posters, coasters and other cultural ephemera currently proclaims – to ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’. And to some extent, that is indeed my counsel for Anglicanism. The Church will survive. It is God’s body. He will not neglect it. That is precisely why gathering matters so much for churches and denominations, even when we are not quite sure of our moorings any more, and perhaps even fear we may no longer belong together. Just ask the disciples, who when all seemed lost and hopeless, did not split up and go their separate ways. They still gathered together in an upper room, and waited for what must have seemed like an eternity.

Yet wait together they did, for the promise of the Spirit to come upon them. And two other disciples, walking together one late afternoon, still in grief and shock at the loss of their messiah, and after a long hike up the road to Emmaus, invited a stranger who had strolled with them, to share in their simple supper. We know how that story ends. In breaking bread together, Jesus was truly present. And so, ‘the Lord be with you...’.

Endnotes

* Some earlier parts of this paper were initially explored in *Anglicanism: Confidence, Commitment and Communion* (Ashgate, 2013), *Thirty-Nine New Articles: An Anglican Landscape of Faith* (SCM-Canterbury, 2013), a lecture given at St. John’s College, Auckland, New Zealand , April 2013.

† Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2006, p.12.

‡ Ben Quash, *Abiding*, London, Bloomsbury, 2013.

§ Christina Patterson, *The Independent*, July 29, 2009, p.28.