

St Boniface Trust Essay Competition

Why I am an Anglican and believe I shall remain so

Callan Slipper

[The Judges described this essay as 'written from the heart, and engaging.' The Reverend Callan Slipper is an Anglican priest, a member of the Focolare movement and associate editor of Claritas. The essay required very little editing prior to publication, apart from reformatting and the addition of one or two additional footnotes.]

Let me put it this way: I am an Anglican, and believe I shall remain so, because this gives me Christ. It is, quite simply, amazing. Christ brings with him the whole of the Divinity and, in fact, the entire cosmos. How can I be anything but grateful to the Church that gives me such a gift?

I know that many Anglicans are willing to recognize the limitations of their Church. And I have to say I like this, even though at times it seems to me to go too far. Just think of Jesus' disciples: they were not exactly perfect human beings. Any attempt to dress them up as flawless would be ridiculous. What was interesting about them is not how virtuous they were. It is Jesus, the One they followed. It is the same with Anglicans and our Church. What is interesting about us is not so much us, but Jesus. Nonetheless, there are specific features of the Anglican way that are interesting in that they help us follow Jesus.

The key thing, putting it in personal terms, is that in this community, among these people, Jesus finds me. It is not that I am denying that Jesus finds people elsewhere, in other Churches or even outside the Churches. Jesus can, quite literally, do what he likes. How many saints and holy people, mystics and prophets there are beyond the confines of the Anglican Churches! But how vividly and how easily, with a transcendent homeliness, he comes in an Anglican setting.

I am not speaking of mere familiarity. It is true that I am used to the smell and peculiar silence there is, for instance, in an English country church, and I am used to the language we use, both ancient and more recent; I know my way around our various churchmanships and

value the chance for evangelicals and liberals and catholics and all the rest, whatever their shade of spirituality or theology, to meet on equal terms. But the homeliness of Anglicanism is more than this. It is in the mixture of liberty and what I can best express by calling it a kind of 'humanness' that allows persons to be genuinely themselves. There is no point in denying that among us, as among most groups, there are people who lord it over others or who tut-tut to make them conform, but the system itself (insofar as it can be called a system) does not make a virtue of demanding compliance, rather the contrary. And the reason why this matters is that it is only in our genuineness that we can truly encounter what is true; that is, only when we are not pretending can we have a real meeting with Jesus. He finds us when we are ourselves, in the reality of our condition.

And the reality of our condition is that life cannot be wrapped up in neat packages; reality is always bigger than our codifications and our understanding is in constant development. The history of the Church, as indeed the history of Israel recounted in the Old Testament, witnesses to how this development includes extremely important doctrinal and ethical issues (polygamy, ideas of the afterlife, freedom of conscience, slavery— to name but a few), so that it is obviously risky, while being firm in our basic convictions, to be too doctrinaire about how to apply them. What is lampooned as Anglican fuzziness is not about slack thinking, intellectual dishonesty or ecclesiastical insincerity. It is a recognition of facts.

Not a formula but a person

This does not mean we have no message. We do. But it is less a matter of propositions and formulae, even though it necessarily includes some central, essential teachings, than of something far more important. Our message is a person: Jesus — and Jesus crucified, the scandal of an incarnate God who makes himself nothing out of love for us. It is this person who Anglicans follow and who they are called to present to the world.

And it is this person who is always bigger than our understanding. He finds me in his Word. The Anglican tradition has a lively sense of Scripture as the Word of God written. To my mind there is an impressive balance to Article 6 of the *Thirty-Nine Articles* which says (my italics):

'Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.'

So typically Anglican — and so precise. It does not claim that Scripture is the compendium of all truth, scientific or otherwise. It does not even claim that Scripture contains all that can truly be said of God. Scripture, nonetheless, is the touchstone for the truth that brings us into a real and life-giving relationship with God. We can affirm that which 'may be proved thereby' and so affirm, for instance, that glory of the Christian faith: the perception God as Trinity. But the power of Scripture seen from this perspective is more than simply how it presents doctrinal truth. If Scripture gives me what is necessary for salvation and what is necessary for salvation is Jesus, then Scripture gives me Jesus. The Word of God written opens up to me the Word of God made flesh. Through it I can encounter the One who comes to me to transform me.

The centrality of community and liturgy

The setting for this encounter is in the Church, and in particular in the Church's expression of itself in liturgy. It means that the text is heard above all and in first place in the heart of the community: it is never a merely individualistic affair despite the fact that it is always aimed at transforming the individual within the community. The tradition goes back to the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549 and its development of the Morning and Evening Prayer out of the sevenfold Benedictine Office. This development put the language of the liturgy into English, so that it could nourish the community in depth by touching also people's intellectual and cognitive capacities, alongside the parts of them touched non-verbally by the drama of liturgical action. The reason for the liturgical setting is that when the Word is heard like this, it is at its most effective: during the liturgy the Word speaks to the whole of the human subject who is not an isolated individual but a person in community and who is, furthermore, not merely a brain for processing ideas but a complex being using the imagination and the senses, and is open to every kind of non-conceptual understanding. The Anglican emphasis addresses the reality of the human condition.

The tradition continues today, as can be seen in the 2004 Windsor Report, which states

'for scripture to "work" as the vehicle of God's authority it is vital that it be read at the heart of worship in a way which (through appropriate lectionaries, and the use of scripture in canticles etc.) allows it to be heard, understood and reflected upon, not as a pleasing and religious background noise, but as God's living and active word'.¹

This of course does not exempt anyone from engaging with the text at other times, and most importantly by translating it into daily life. Indeed, as the Report makes clear, biblical scholarship is necessary to make sure that we are not simply finding our own prejudices reflected in it. Furthermore, the community opening itself to the eternal Word in the words of Scripture is structured and gifted, not only with scholars and holy people who help us to hear the Word more truly, but with 'Christian leaders — chiefly within the Anglican tradition, of bishops' whose role 'as teachers of scripture can hardly be overemphasised,'² although the Report immediately contextualizes this as not resting so much in juridical authority as in the spiritual root that nourishes their giftedness, their episcopal charism, saying that *'The "authority" of bishops cannot reside solely or primarily in legal structures, but, as in Acts 6.4, in their ministry of "prayer and the word of God"'.³* It is therefore a community of persons, that is, the Church, with all the richness and complexity of the gifts that characterize its life, that hears the Word. As members of that community Anglicans are privileged to be able to encounter the transforming presence of Jesus.

Concern for the wider community and for every human being

This does not mean that we are all saints, already transformed by the Word. We are sinners struggling like our fellow Christians and, indeed, the rest of humanity — whatever the advantages of our tradition may be. Furthermore, the community that, from the beginning of the emergence of the reformed Church of England, was supposed to share in the liturgy, was in fact the whole nation; but that never really happened. Indeed, despite

¹ Windsor Report 2004, Section B, Paragraph 57.

² Ibid, Paragraph 58.

³ Ibid.

the wonderful work also done by other Churches, the English cannot claim to be especially holy! Nonetheless, the attempt was there. From an Anglican perspective the nation was one concrete and specific place where, through the Church, humanity can meet Divinity and share in the divine life. At heart the vision is still the same: through the Church people have the opportunity to meet the Word made flesh and experience his life-giving transformation that touches every aspect of human life, personal and social. While the idea of national Churches may have some questionable aspects, the core value remains the same throughout the world: to work for and within the community, whoever it is made of, participating in its institutions and addressing people in their actual context, according to their specific culture. Every Anglican Church is called to do that. The Church of England does it via its Establishment, which gives it access and a voice within the policy making of the society where it is. That, so far, the success of the Gospel is partial and limited is due not only to Anglican weakness but to the choices made by those we live among.

Nonetheless, specifically with reference to communicating the Gospel to the world, I find it striking that the Anglican way has some specific gifts in bringing Jesus to the fallible actuality of the human condition. Let me stress again that I am not in the least wishing to deny that Jesus meets people in other Churches, whether it be those that have comparatively recently put the liturgy into a language people can understand, or those that have tended to underplay the role of community or liturgy in the Church's life. What seems to be clear is that the Anglican way reduces the likelihood of exchanging a life-giving encounter for the reading of mere words — however venerable, indeed holy. Christians (of all Churches) have frequently fallen prey to the temptation to think that the Bible is either a mine for doctrines, a source of true propositions, or a set of legal or semi-legal statements given to regulate conduct. No doubt it includes both these things. It does tell us essential things about what is the case and about how to behave. But that is not the point. Neither simply a textbook nor just a law book, the Bible, in the complexity of the genres that make it up, opens us up to the Word beyond words. If, as is ingrained in the Anglican approach, we recognize that our understanding is limited and constantly developing, and so changing, then it is easier for us to see that this meeting is personal. Our response to the person who comes to us to transform us with his grace, in the first instance, is faith: we consign ourselves to the One who is truth, the ἀλήθεια⁴ of the Greek New Testament, a word with the force of both the Hebrew meaning 'that which is wholly reliable' and the Greek meaning 'the real state of affairs'. We consign ourselves to Jesus. He speaks his words into our lives and we find them to be words of life.

This is how the Bible is the Church's book. It does not belong to any group of representative people, be they clergy or exegetes, who have control of the text, for all they contribute to the community's understanding. Hence, while not denying the role of authoritative statements by those who have a personal charism of discernment, namely the bishops, hearing the Word of God aright depends upon the whole community into which the living Word speaks his words of life. It depends, crucially, therefore upon the *sensus fidelium*, the instinct for truth of the whole Church in its encounter with Jesus. Indeed, authoritative interpreters, in listening to the Holy Spirit, still have to submit everything to the *sensus fidelium* as the final arbiter of the truth of their affirmations. No interpretation of

⁴ *Alētheia* = truth.

Scripture can be held definitively until it is clearly seen to reflect the mind of the whole Church.⁵

Of course this has the unavoidable weakness that discernment does not come up with definitive answers overnight. In the process necessarily differing views are aired and this leads to tension and can lead to division. This too is plain in the Anglican experience. For all its apparent weakness, however, to live in a Church that attempts to facilitate precisely this discernment together is an enormous blessing. Precisely here where we seem to be most weak the greatest strength lies, because precisely here it is possible to meet with the person of Jesus in the midst of the community and to make him the focus of our attention. If I were to criticize my Church at all, it would not be for the struggles we face in seeking to discern the truth. These are inevitable. Changing circumstances and growing understanding mean that new discernment is necessarily part of the process of the Church's life and so a good thing. No, my criticism would be that we pay insufficient heed to the gift we have and do not focus enough upon the living presence of the Lord among us, as he promised: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'⁶ For this to be done, we have less to worry about our specific points of view (convincing others or correcting their errors) and more about making sure that he is among us, which means focusing upon love for one another. Mutual love leads to truth, because it makes the Truth himself live among us.

A peculiar experience of authority

The Anglican advantage for achieving this is rooted in a peculiar experience of authority. The community experience of discernment described above requires everyone to play his or her part. This means that the learned and those with a particular experience, mystical or otherwise, and even those who speak out of their grasp of life but have no special claim to knowledge, all have a responsibility along with those who have a personal charism for discernment as one aspect of their position of leadership. This gives rise to what has been called 'dispersed authority'. It was already noted in 1948, when the Lambeth Conference's Report IV commented:

*Authority, as inherited by the Anglican Communion from the undivided Church of the early centuries of the Christian era, is single in that it is derived from a single Divine source, and reflects within itself the richness and historicity of the divine Revelation.... It is distributed among Scripture, Tradition, Creeds, the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments, the witness of saints, and the consensus fidelium, which is the continuing experience of the Holy Spirit through His faithful people in the Church. It is thus a dispersed rather than a centralized authority having many elements which combine, interact with, and check each other...*⁷

Such dispersed authority demands that the laity are part of the Church's decision-making and this needs to be underlined. It is a vital part of the Anglican tradition, a real gain (or perhaps better a recovery, since the role of those who were not ordained was stronger in the New Testament and the early Church) that emerged as a result of the upheavals at the

⁵ Perhaps the most clear example of this historically is in the Arian controversy when two Councils of bishops in 359, in the East at Seleucia and in the West at Arimium, favoured Arian positions. The laity would not accept them and, together with some notable episcopal exceptions, it was the laity who preserved the faith.

⁶ Matthew Chapter 18.20.

⁷ The Lambeth Conference (London 1948) Report IV. 'The Anglican Communion', p84.

time of the Reformation. Its balance allows the Church to be rooted in the ancient tradition, handing on (*παράδοσις*⁸) the Gospel, with due attention to the useful but inessential traditions that in any culture give expression to the Gospel, while at the same time being free not only to adapt how the message is proclaimed afresh, but to investigate the Gospel's implications and to find new understandings that realize more fully the message itself. Dispersed authority equips the Anglican Churches with the means to be explorers, which is another way of saying that they have the means, potentially at least, of being increasingly true to Christ. Thus rooted in Scripture and faithful to the Creeds that are 'the sufficient statement of the Christian faith',⁹ Anglicanism can be focused on the truth revealed in the person of Jesus in a way that is undoctrinaire, open, even creative. Of course, there are many failures along the way; that is part of being frail human beings liable to sin. But the gift is there.

During my lifetime we have had and still have some extremely difficult questions to face and strive to work through, particularly in what could broadly be called 'gender issues' touching human sexuality and sacramental order within the Church. I do not think it is fair to dismiss them as of secondary importance because they have such a profound effect upon human flourishing. But they are not at all the only issues, merely the ones most likely to cause division among us. Tomorrow, however, there will be other issues, no doubt as deeply felt. We cannot foresee them, but the life of the Church is not static and will unavoidably come across new and potentially divisive questions. We are on a journey.

The Sacraments

This journey, however, is not only about the future. The fulfilment of what is to come is in fact the deepening of what we already have, and this is especially evident in the Sacraments. Here the reality of Jesus is presented such that, here and now, we can enter into it. The Anglican way is to emphasize both Word and Sacrament. And for that too I am deeply grateful. The Sacraments are such a powerful encounter with Jesus and an experience of his grace—especially the Eucharist; indeed, I must admit that I am something of a Eucharist junky. Of course, Anglican tradition gives prominent place not just to the Eucharist but to both the Sacraments of the Lord, that is, those rites that Scripture shows Jesus as initiating, and so to Baptism as well as the Eucharist.¹⁰ Baptism brings us into the Church where, living the Word, we can live out our journey together with others, but it is the Eucharist that fulfils the work of the Word by allowing us to be caught up fully in the life, work and present reality of Jesus. This Eucharistic vision is at the core of the Anglican tradition, even though it may not always be perceived clearly enough by all Anglicans. In the *Thirty-Nine Articles* it is stressed that the Sacraments, which are 'effectual signs of grace',¹¹ 'were not ordained of Christ to be gazed upon, or to be carried about, but that we should duly use them'.¹² It is a clear protest against mediæval Eucharistic devotion and seeks to shift the Church's attention from honouring the Lord's presence as a kind of static, external adoration to a dynamic communion whereby that presence is shared in by worshippers. No wonder what

⁸ *paradosis*

⁹ *From the 'Lambeth Quadrilateral' second point*

¹⁰ *For the baptismal commission by the Risen Lord see: Matthew 28.19 & Mark 16.16; see also Matthew 3.11; Mark 1.8; Luke 16.16; and also John 3.22 & 4.1-2.*

For the institution of the Eucharist see: Matthew 26.26-29; Mark 14.22-25; Luke 22.14, esp. v19; and 1 Corinthians 11.23-26.

¹¹ *The Thirty-Nine Articles, Article 25.*

¹² *Ibid*

the Articles call ‘the supper of the Lord’¹³ was titled in the *Book of Common Prayer* as *The Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion* and subsequently generally referred to only as *The Communion*. The emphasis is upon the transformative encounter with Jesus. We come to know him and enter into a new, profound relationship with him, one that fulfils the work begun in our liturgical hearing of the Word, hence the Sacrament brings about our Christification at every level of our being, which the *Prayer of Humble Access* puts thus:

*Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.*¹⁴

This process takes place within us as persons in the community, as so aptly put by *Common Worship’s* verse and response before going to receive Communion, borrowing words from Paul the Apostle (one of the liturgical high points of Anglican liturgy, it seems to me): ‘*We break this bread to share in the body of Christ. Though we are many we are one body, because we all share in one bread.*’¹⁵ Our Communion, in making us ‘*very members incorporate in the mystical body*’,¹⁶ effects a divinization, since we are united with Christ who is God, which is also a humanization, since we are united with Christ who is also perfect humanity.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Anglicism traditionally held that frequent communion should be the norm — in contrast to the Mediæval Church when communion among the laity was rare. Such an amazing event and such a potent moment of prayer, one that participates in Jesus’ ‘*one oblation of himself once offered*’¹⁷ deserves our constant attention. There is a characteristically Anglican Eucharistic devotion and in allowing ourselves to be drawn into it we are brought into the divine life, and in doing so we also consecrate the society to which we belong.

Of course, the Anglican tradition does not only contain the two Sacraments of the Lord. Human life is also brought to God through what the Church of England’s *Revised Catechism* of 1969 calls those other ‘ministries of grace’ (absolution, confirmation, healing, ordination and matrimony). The Church is the place of grace. When it works as it should, the great richness of its diversity and its openness to whatever the Holy Spirit may be saying in new ways allows individuals and groups the space to go on their journey to God.

My own journey

This is what happened to me. I grew up in a quiet country parish, which had no expectations of achieving mystical or liturgical heights, all very ‘Church of England’ and sparsely attended. But after breaking with the world of my childhood in an attempt to discern what was really true, and having travelled spiritually via the construction of my own religion as well as a fascination for Buddhism in particular and Eastern spirituality in general, I discovered Jesus, which is to say that he came into my life and won my heart. For me this

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *The Book of Common Prayer 1662.*

¹⁵ *See 1 Corinthians Chapter 10.17.*

¹⁶ *The second prayer after Communion in the Book of Common Prayer, used also in Common Worship Order Two as a post communion Prayer of Thanksgiving.*

¹⁷ *Book of Common Prayer 1662, Holy Communion, from the Prayer of Consecration.*

happened in the discovery of the spirituality of unity, with its twin poles of love for Jesus who died forsaken on the cross and commitment to Jesus' prayer the night before he died: *'Father, may they all be one'*,¹⁸ coupled with its desire to put the Gospel into practice in a contemporary manner and in the most real way possible. I had discovered the spirituality of an Italian Roman Catholic lay woman, Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare Movement, and felt called by Jesus to it. Having been a cradle Anglican before my journey to this point, I found myself now coming at Anglicanism from the outside and seeing it in this new light. Encouraged to be a genuine member of my Church by the spirituality I was now living, I found I was making new discoveries that were not obvious in the Church of my childhood, but that were nonetheless fully Anglican. I found many things lit up as never before. By way of illustration I could mention just one that came to me as a complete novelty, but that also shows something of the nature of the Church as experienced by Anglicans.

In my part of the Church little was ever said of Mary, the God-bearer. She was seen as something suspect that had to do with the Roman Catholics; and Roman devotion to her, insofar as anyone knew anything about it, was alien and rather repulsive. Through the spirituality of unity, however, I discovered a different, scriptural view of Mary. I began to see her as the person who gave birth to Jesus the God-man and to realize how she is the model of every Christian, since we are all called to give birth to the real presence of Jesus in the community and in us. This was Mary who pointed to Jesus, a loving silence through whom the Word can be spoken in history.

I did not need to leave my Church, I needed simply to acquire some of its riches. There are so many, like an ever-deepening love of the Bible! The spirituality of unity in helping me see them made me love my Church more and more. I have come to realize how much the distinctive style of my Church is a gift for other Christians and to appreciate how it is effectively the presence of Christ at work in the community, even when it is not engaged in direct evangelism but catering for a vast range of social, educational, artistic and other cultural needs. And I appreciate its struggle to be true to itself on a worldwide scale, trying to find the correct structures to enable the spirit of love to carry on a conversation as we explore the full meaning of the Gospel together. Not an easy task and one where trials, difficulties and disappointments regularly happen.

Indeed, it is true that the Anglican Churches today are challenged in carrying out their mission. But every age has its crisis. The Church is a concrete and human institution, and so carries the burden both of human sinfulness and of all the limitations of the fallible human condition which mean we will always be striving to grasp the full meaning of Jesus and never achieving it until the conclusion of all things when he comes again. In the meantime, living out the gift that has been given us, he meets and draws us into relationship with him in the midst of the real difficulties and sometimes the tragedies we face. The reality of the negative, however, through his cross and passion, is never definitive and never destroys the gift of his living reality among us.

Conclusion

I do not think that this is an exclusive gift of Anglicanism, however. Far from it. I am not an Anglican as opposed to any other kind of Christian. Indeed I cannot be an Anglican

¹⁸ *John Chapter 17.21.*

without feeling that every other kind of Christianity is also mine: evangelical, catholic, orthodox, pentecostal — all of the Churches with their particular kinds of giftedness are part of the Body to which I, as an Anglican, also belong. Their joys as well as their sorrows are mine. At the same time my very Anglicanness, while it tells me to learn from everyone within my Church, would only contract itself if it did not also urge me to welcome the gifts that other Churches can offer. We have to learn and have the humility to accept what others can supply. God is generous and so it is extremely unlikely that God has not poured out gifts on all. Nonetheless, as I hope I have shown, Anglicanism does have its clearly-defined characteristics and its gifts to bring to the communion among Christians.

It is a place where Jesus today meets his followers, dwells among them and serves others around them. It is thus, at its heart, projected outside the confines of itself. No doubt in some countries the Anglican Churches have to recover the full meaning of this heart so they can bring more vibrantly the living Christ into the society and the nation where they are. But in presenting the person of Jesus to the reality of the human condition they have the gifts to carry out this task. No doubt also there are challenges, both internal and external, that threaten to undermine the Church itself. But, if we live within our dispersed authority, we trust not in ourselves but in the Holy Spirit to lead us. In this case our very difficulties become our crowning strength: they offer the opportunity in liberty and mutual responsibility to be open to God. It is then God who works in us and through us. We have only to be faithful.

In the end, therefore, the reason to be and to remain an Anglican is a matter of openness to the gift of God. It is a response to Jesus who finds us and loves us in this particular way in this Church where a part of humanity dwells within Jesus' identification of himself, the God-man, with his beloved creation.