

## Sermon for the Keble Mass 16 July 2010

You will have heard, I am sure, the alleged Chinese curse ‘may you be born in interesting times.’ I seem to recall first hearing that said years ago, in the ‘interesting’ times of the debates over the ordination of women. Those protracted debates were certainly of interest to most of the church, though a lot of women did leave, losing interest in a church not sufficiently interested in them! Of my Sydney contemporaries who formed a lobby group in 1975 called Anglican Women Concerned, I know of only two of us who remain active members of the Anglican Church. Interesting and costly, too costly times I believe.

If we thought the 1970’s and 80’s were interesting what are we to say about the last few years? We who value the unity and the breadth of the Anglican way might want to call the last few years deeply troubling and even profoundly distressing. I recall taking a doctoral class in ecclesiology in the early 1990’s in the US – ecclesiology asks what is the nature of this community called church - and talking about the threat of schism in Australia. I was fine until I said there was a bishop in Sydney promoting disunity. At that point I burst into tears. I felt ashamed to come from a church where a bishop could so betray his vocation – then only his –to nurture our unity in Christ. It was – it is - truly shocking when bishops lack the capacity to live with legitimately orthodox yet diverse views on complex matters of the sort we face today. If those called to lead the Church cannot remain steadfast and patient in turmoil, how will they encourage the rest of us to do so?

So we gather this evening in seriously interesting times. John Keble preached his famous Assize sermon in complex and demanding times for the English Church. The Church was unpopular with the government and in some key areas controlled by it; society was increasingly secular while too much worship was dull and neglectful of the sacraments. Between state interference and a general decline in faith, the poor Church had fallen on hard times. A new vision was required. John Keble and those who thought like him, provided just such a vision for a renewed community of faith. They looked back to apostolic foundations in a way long neglected among Anglicans and ahead to the kingdom only God can and will bring in. John Keble called the Church to a new integrity. Then, it was the integrity of the Church in its relationship with the nation.

I believe we need a new integrity for these ‘interesting’ times. This time, we need an integrity based on our relationships with one another, and with the humanity we share with all peoples. It is the integrity of honesty and inclusion. It is the integrity of a new humanity, global and local, seeing no groups or peoples as beyond God’s reach. Many of us seek to be just such a church; others don’t want an unconditional welcome being extended and will oppose our ways. I do have a vision of what inclusion means and it is not just ‘whatever’. I have a saying about church life: everyone is welcome but not anything goes. We are a school for grace when all is said and done; the gospel won’t leave us unchanged if it is the gospel.

Of course, it is tempting to think that we face unprecedented times. We do not. What we face are the times in which God has allowed us to be born and called us to live the catholic faith in the Anglican way. So, these are just particular times. What is particular is the context and the content of our struggles over what it is to be a human being, especially a sexual, embodied being, and what it requires of us if we are to be human together. If you think that is too broad a way of stating what we are grappling with remember James Joyce’s famous definition of the Church catholic – here comes everybody!

The times are shaped by how we communicate. The internet is changing us, globally and personally. We are acutely aware of a social world that is global. We can hold the means of communicating globally in our palms.<sup>1</sup> This new reality pushes us into information overload. It can make us indifferent to the suffering, the wars, and the injustices ‘out there’ presented to us daily. It becomes all too easy to turn others into objects and forget that we share with them the divine and embodied humanity we all derive from the Word made flesh. To boost ourselves, we are all liable to devalue and stigmatize those we disagree with. It’s an old game. The gospel calls us to stop playing it, and sometimes we manage not to.

We end up living between this global identity and the local reality that we are men and women, living in particular places with various and diverse passions, tasks in life and sexual orientations. Living within this reality, between the global and local, can be almost bipolar, pulling us apart. No wonder, in the face of complexity that so many Christians and others seek refuge in defining themselves by what seems unchangeable: religion, biology, and ethnicity. It seems an easy, even God approved way out of the dilemma. It is asserted as such. The bible is said to support it. Of course, it is no solution at all, but a shortcut to devaluing difference.

‘You cannot be a Christian if you think/ behave like that’ we shout across the world and we shout around the Anglican Communion at each other. As I said, it’s an old game. If the infant church hadn’t got caught up in that destructive dynamic we would have almost none of their correspondence! Shorter letters would have been fine. *Dear Romans, how mature and irenic you are with one another. I shan’t be dropping by, there’s no need. Love, Paul.*

Instead, we need to find ways to remain patient and persistent in unsettled times without compromising our faith or our humanity and while remaining in conversation with one another. Paul is clear in his letter to the Romans. Within the community of faith we are to live for the common good. The strong are to bear with the weak. All are to follow the example of Christ. Here is the radical call to integrity. To say that ‘Christ did not please himself refers’ to his whole life. His whole life was lived entirely *as himself* more fully himself than you and I are able to be who we are, in this broken and divided world. But Jesus was himself for God’s sake. And Jesus is our pattern. Nothing less than living as himself would have pleased the God whom Jesus called ‘father’ in seeking to express the closeness of identity. His is the maturity we are called to and enabled by the gift of the Spirit to live, at least in part. We do not live that maturity when we deny who we are or ask others to deny their identity. We do not live it when we hide from our sisters and brothers. And we do not live it when we objectify or demonise others.

Karl Barth famously said that ‘humanity which is not co-humanity is inhumanity.’ It is this integrity which best expresses the catholic faith – *which is not for the sake of making us religious, but for remaking us as human beings fully alive.*<sup>2</sup> Thus we become, even in fragmentary moments, the glory of God. John Keble deplored the habit of judging uncharitably; that is, without compassion for others’ brokenness, without compassion for our own.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to my son David Stewart, a lawyer working for Ofcom, the UK office for regulation of telecommunications, for introducing me to the work of the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells, especially his analysis of the impact of global identity on shaping fundamentalist Christian responses to the new challenges to patriarchal structures in personal and communal life.

<sup>2</sup> I can’t stress enough that faith in God is originally meant to be the most natural thing in the world; it is we who need the practices of faith and a faith supporting community to keep believing.

So, when the Anglican Communion covenant process asks some Churches to refrain from some actions but fails to include all those things done by member Churches that break down our common life, we are rightly suspicious that the mutuality of the strong and the weak is being abused. Part of the integrity we need in these times is for people in all our parishes, gay and straight alike, to be enabled to live deeply and openly in Christ, in ways they and we together discern are grace filled for all of us.

We who lead parishes have an obligation to assist all who worship with us to become more fully who they are in Christ – straight, gay, young, old, strong weak, clever or not. When some of our sisters and brothers are denigrated, pushed into dark corners or worse, we must all receive these insults as falling on us. ‘Here comes everybody’ out of such mutuality comes hope. And hope in the God who brings life out of death, clarity out of confusion, truth out of listening and honest debate; hope in that God enables us to be steadfast and faithful in these interesting times.

The catholic faith will never provide us the means to scapegoat and reject others. It is the means by which we are to live in a Christ imitating humility and identification with others, even the others we don’t like; we will each have our lists.

True catholic faith unmask our games because it unmask us. But it will also transform us. But it will only transform us in our common humanity if we give ourselves to God for the sake of those we do not yet love, as well as those we already embrace.

Archdeacon Alison Taylor

Preached at St John’s East Malvern

16 July 2010