

IF ONLY I'D BEEN BORN

Address by Fr. Tony Clavier to the Clergy Association of Pittsburgh,
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I sometimes wish I had been born in the late 18th Century! It would have been lovely to be an English or perhaps Virginian country parson in those days. The church's legislative bodies hadn't met in decades, the Evangelical Movement was ossifying into a party, the Anglo-Catholics were yet to arrive on the scene and most Anglican clergy on both sides of the ditch might well fit John Betjeman's description:

“Broad of Church and broad of mind;
Broad in front and broad behind.”

Dean Church would later describe such a clergyman as being “not fully alive to the greatness of his calling”!

But that wasn't to be, and as I am recovering from cancer perhaps that is just as well. Medicine was then even a bit cruder than chemotherapy. I happen to live in an age of turmoil, of confusion, of division and mutual recrimination. As I am not a particularly confrontational type, this doesn't suit at all. My temptation is to wander into my study, close the door and immerse myself in things past. Many Anglican clergy have been called to such a life. There was a time when sound Divinity and scholarship was more the product of the rectory study than of the university or seminary. Anglican clergy were described as “stupor mundi”, the wonder of the world. Both the Evangelical and Catholic revivals in Anglicanism were born not in Conventions or Synods but in the homes of devoted clergy and laity.

We have all experienced that almost visceral frisson of horror when a vestry member—why is it normally the treasurer?—starts to blither about our need to be practical, citing the way things are done by boards of directors, or in politics or the Rotary Club. The real meaning is that while religion may be fine, in church we need to be practical. There's always a slight whiff of sulfur in the air on such occasions!

I realize that I run the risk today of being so heavenly minded I am no earthly use. I will take that risk because at this moment of division and discord I want to remind us of our goodly heritage, of the elements in our ethos which have made us distinct. The problem is that many of the elements I shall mention do not seem particularly practical and may even seem weak and other-worldly in a moment of time when we believe we need practical, instant and effective solutions. If we feel this to be so, perhaps we think the following “marks” of Anglicanism are at best discarded or at least ignored.

Yet as I shall go on to suggest, there is a possibility that in the midst of our search for instant solutions we are stumbling into enemy territory, into picking up the enemy's weapons. We do so with the best of intentions, but we all know what road is paved with good intentions.

As I write these words I do so using the word processing program on my computer. It is so

convenient. When I have finished, I can attach this to an email and have it to Bruce Robison in the twinkling of an eye. To print this off, put it in an envelope with an attached letter, take it to the post office on Monday and mail it not only takes time, but I risk it not getting from Morgantown, West Virginia, to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in time for this meeting. I can drive the distance in a bit over an hour!

Our thirst for the instant not only affects the way we do things, I am beginning to think it affects the way we view God. He becomes for us the God of the instant response. Just as we tend to think that all problems must have a solution **now** and that all problems are ultimate and must be solved **now** or all will be lost, so we begin to think that God either wants to fix things **now** or worse still, has entrusted us with the task of fixing things **now**. After all, if left, they will only get worse.

I've lived in the United States for most of my adult life, so perhaps I can risk saying to you that Americans not only want a quick fix, they want a structure in which to make that quick fix. Even in the midst of trying to be spiritual we envision political/structural solutions. Just as political discourse is often about persons and not principles, seeks to argue back, catch someone out, force someone to say or act in a specific manner, so our religious discourse all too often follows this pattern. If we are not name-calling we are proposing structural solutions often of some novelty, in which we may contain our new alignments. No group in the contemporary Episcopal Church is immune from this temptation just as all of us, as much as we flinch from the thought are still very much formed by the Enlightenment and by political structures which emerged in the Age of Reason.

In a recent book on Anglican history—I can't quote him because I lent the book to my priest son—Archbishop Rowan points to the Anglican virtue of patience. Unlike some of you, I don't have a mathematical frame of mind and so I can't remember texts by chapter and verse easily, and thus I must look in my ancient, battered, small print Cruden's Concordance given me by an evangelical Methodist shoe repairer when I was a boy.

As I am in a proof texting mood, here are some references:

Luke 21. 19: "In your patience possess your souls."—"by your endurance you will save your lives." REV.

Romans 5: 3: "... knowing that tribulation worketh patience and patience, experience and experience hope." (RSV "endurance")

Romans 15. 4: "that we through patience 'steadfastness' and comfort might have hope."

Romans 15. 5: "the God of patience (steadfastness) grant you to be like minded..."

2 Thess, I. 4: "so that we glory in you for your patience.(steadfastness)"

I Tim. 6. 11: "and follow after love, patience, (steadfastness) meekness..."

The modern translators have us understand the old English word “patience” in terms of “stick ability” endurance, steadfastness, or perhaps staying put in the midst of everything. One doesn’t endure by removing oneself from the scene to a safe place.

There’s a lot, lot more. I would commend to you all a study of these and other texts. Of course it is much more fun to smite down the Amalekites hip and thigh or to pick through St. Paul to discover juicy passages about discipline, some of which may apply, but all of which are to be viewed through the patient compassion of Jesus our Savior and Lord.

If I am to list a group of what might be termed Anglican virtues, I would begin with patience. It is or used to be in our DNA. May I suggest that it was thrust upon us in one particular context?

As some of you know, particularly if you attended or are associated with a seminary just down the road from here, our first Reformers, over time, embraced the Evangelical tradition of Martin Bucer, Peter Martyr and Heinrich Bullinger in its immediately pre-Calvin context. Ironically it was Calvin who encouraged Cranmer to continue the Episcopal system of government. However the preservation of the diocesan and parochial system imposed upon Evangelicals a distinct form of pastoral patience. One may believe that the church is Invisible and Visible, that men and women are destined either to salvation or damnation, but in practice every single baptized person in the village was a parishioner and under the care of the parish priest. One may think that parishioners were hell bent but unless they were notorious or frightened the horses, one was obliged to care for them, probably have them confirmed, married, visit them in sickness and in health and bury them in the churchyard.

16th Century Anglicanism may have been Protestant but it was “haunted by its Catholic past” as Diarmaid MacCulloch puts it. Dr Jean Maltby demonstrates in her study of the Elizabethan and early Caroline Church that some Puritans just couldn’t handle dining with publicans and sinners. Many were hauled before the ecclesiastical courts because they refused to celebrate the Eucharist for sinners or catechize their children. Puritans like Richard Hooker’s nemesis, Walter Travers wanted a pure church made up of the elect. These people just didn’t have the patience necessary to be Anglicans.

A study of 18th Century Evangelical pastoral practice in the Church of England demonstrates a similar pastoral patience. Tempted though he was to emulate the Methodists and create churches for believers, William Grimshaw at Howarth, later the Bronte parish, cared for his erring flock, although often his patience was sorely taxed. Charles Simeon of Holy Trinity, Cambridge, brought back Confirmation into good repute and instituted early Communion services. He remains the very model of a patient parish priest. One could easily cite similar patience among High Church and later Anglo-Catholic pastors from the pages of our history. I am not suggesting that pastoral patience is the unique virtue of Anglican clergy, but it has been one of our notable traits. These traditions lived in our own branch of the Communion and may be encountered in the staunchly pastoral “church” traditions espoused by Philander Chase, Charles Pettit McIlvaine, John Henry Hobart, Kemper and Hopkins, Polk, Hare and Tuttle, Muhlenberg and William Reed Huntingdon. That we are perhaps unfamiliar with these people and their writings and deeds demonstrates just how deep our amnesia has become.

Patience reminds us that we may not know God's plan in detail and what seems to be a dreadful situation a collective dark night of the soul, may well be, as in the past, a preparation for revival. We may at this moment espouse different practical solutions but we must have patience with each other and give space to each other, even if we disagree passionately about tactics. God may prove us all wrong: Liberal and Conservative, "progressive" and "orthodox."

Another Anglican virtue is comprehension. Here again we tend to underestimate the passions of the past to magnify the problems of the moment. Read the admittedly skewed evidences of Puritans and Church folk in the 1640s on both sides of the Atlantic and you will read stories of clerical, even Episcopal immorality, doctrinal innovation or ignorance, worldliness of clergy and laity, heresy and schism. Think of the 18th. Century Church, of naughty prelates like Bishop Hervey of Derry of whom it was said—"his ambition and his lust alone can get the better of his avarice"—or heretics like Bishop Hoadly who was not alone in his Deism.

We sometimes forget today the great gulf fixed between an Anglo Catholic who believed in Eucharistic Sacrifice, auricular confession, mass, Mary and confession and a staunch Evangelical who denied baptismal regeneration, the Real Presence, the priestly nature of ordination and regarded as immoral manuals of devotions published to help penitents confess their sins to a priest. Read the history of the creation of the Reformed Episcopal Church and note that after schism, those who believed they were reforming Episcopalianism were swiftly elbowed aside by dispensationalists on the one hand and biblical liberals on the other. Within thirty years of its foundation many had returned to the Episcopal Church or drifted away into individual obscurity. It took that church over one hundred years to re-discover its Anglican roots.

We have, as Anglicans, experienced the gravest reasons to divide before and we have divided before. We forget that the founders of Congregational and Baptist Churches were members of the Church of England and that both denominations created Unitarianism before being rescued by the Evangelical Revival. Methodism is Anglicanism's offspring. I have mentioned the Reformed Episcopal Church and I was a "continuing Episcopalian" for a quarter of a century. If you are quite sure that separation is the only way. I urge you to discover ways to preserve your ties not only with the Anglican Communion, but fellowship with Episcopalians, lest you wander off into novelty and forget your comprehensive tradition. The blog world is much too intent on dividing us, dividing even those whose principles are similar. Tribalism is the very opposite of catholicity and liberality, two Anglican traditional virtues. The Holy Spirit is the author of unity, not of recrimination, hostility and division. We may feel justified in occupying our fortified camps. The watching world is alienated. "See how these Christians love one another."

Nor should one suppose that the dangers inherent in schism are not the temptations of those who stay. Establishments may become equally intolerant, insular and self-serving. Provinces with small memberships and monochrome theology easily become the mirror image of separated ecclesial bodies.

Finally Anglicanism is virtuous in its love of beauty. By beauty I do not necessarily mean pomp and ceremony, ritual and ceremonial although that too can have its rightful place as long as it does not become an end in itself, what +Michael Ramsey, in his splendid book "God, Christ and the World" described as "fetishism". I think of the irony of those verbal, rational Reformed

Episcopalians, the foes of sacerdotalism and ritualism who swiftly built gothic revival buildings, the very symbols of the Medievalism they abhorred.

We are the church of John Donne, Lancelot Andrewes, George Herbert, and Thomas Traherne whose beautiful words, poems and prayers still inspire. Think of our evangelical tradition of hymnody typified by Watts and the Wesleys. Read Herrick, Cowper or the diaries of Parson Woodforde or Francis Kilvert, the wonderful prose of William Tyndale and the translators of the Authorized Version of the Bible, the devotional language of Cranmer which survives in Rite 1. In architecture and place we have always shown forth the Incarnation. Beauty is a means of grace. It is often the casualty of war. If you are straying into contempt or suspicion for beauty read the first part of the first chapter of St. John's Gospel: There one finds truth expressed in beauty.

When I served in “continuing church”—the Anglican Province of America—parishes the people swiftly sought to get out of the hired hall and build the best church building they could afford. They mourned the loss of the place where often their grandparents worshipped or they were baptized and married. The loss of beauty and place can foster resentment and anger, the seeds of war, division and the antithesis of the Gospel of hope. Anglicanism is perhaps hopelessly wed to outward and visible signs.

Beauty is part of “liberality” an Anglican virtue I have not the time to do more than mention in passing this morning. It is not to be confused with the word “liberal” at least in its modern meaning. The two contending sides in our church at the moment—you may belong to one or the other—are not noted for that patience of expression, beauty of life, and practice of comprehension which have been marks of Anglicanism because they are surely marks of Christian living. And lest you think I have left out the Cross or neglected Jesus, His death and resurrection run throughout this Anglican story in the lives of men and women, known and forgotten, whose faith was in the Word made Flesh and who died to rise again in His love and care.

Perhaps these memories and reminders are not answers to our immediate questions. Yet I offer them to you this morning in the hope that these last minutes may have been to you a soothing balm in Gilead, a reminder of the company we keep, those who have gone before us whose presence lives in the words we use and the surroundings we preserve or reproduce, and whose communion we invoke whenever we mention that odd word “Anglican”.

Is it folly on my part to remind us all of our tradition, of our way, in the midst of strife and division, when opinions harden, plans sharpen, and battle cries sound? I trust not. May the God of peace keep you in all in peace in believing. Amen