

All Saints' Day: CCSY, 1 November 2009

Wisdom 3:1-9; Ps 24; Rev 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

Hanging loose to the institution

If it feels a little early in the day for organised religion this morning, you're in good company! Whether you were celebrating with the bride and groom, or kicking on after Derby Day, or perhaps Trick or Treating on All Hallows' Eve last night, this All Hallows' Day may have broken a little like the morning after the night before...

All Hallows'; all God's holy ones; All Saints' Day year of our Lord 2009. Since the church's beginnings – indeed since Israel knew itself called to be a light to the nations – the virtue of holiness has been aspired to as an index and a function of discipleship: holiness not in the sense of some squeaky-clean rectitude or moral high ground, but holiness as 'wholeness' – integrity, consistency, singleness of mind, purity of heart. 'Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord', the Psalmist muses, 'or who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands (clean, that is, from injustice; innocent blood) and a pure heart' (24:3-4).

In the ecumenical movement All Saints' has always been treasured as a truly common feast: we seem to have little problem with the mutual recognition of holiness; whereas the mutual recognition of baptism, or ministerial orders is another order of difficulty altogether. One of the World Council of Churches' most fruitful studies at present is the 'Cloud of Witnesses' project, based in the interdenominational monastic community in Bose, northern Italy, providing Christians from all traditions with the opportunity to celebrate that wider community of faith which transcends the boundaries of time, and culture, and unites us in fellowship with angels and archangels, and all the company of heaven.

For Anglicans and Roman Catholics – and for other churches also, I would argue – the shadow of the recent Papal Apostolic Constitution falls across this particular All Saints' tide. It's an issue for all churches precisely because it goes to the heart of what we understand a church – the Church – to be; it challenges our 'ecclesiology', to use a technical term: our doctrine or discourse about the *ecclesia*, the church.

If you believe the headlines, this is a disaster – an ecumenical fault line or fissure which has ruptured beyond repair: "Rock of Ages, Cleft by the Pope", the *New York Times* 'Opinion' headline ran a week ago.¹ "The Anglican experiment is over", bemoans John Broadhurst, the Bishop of Fulham.² My friend and colleague on Faith & Order, Bishop John Hind of Chichester, who preached from this pulpit almost exactly twelve months ago, has indicated that, on the basis of divisions within our own communion of churches over women bishops and human sexuality, he may be ready to take up Pope Benedict's collective invitation to so-called 'disgruntled Anglicans'.³ I suppose I could try and talk him out of it . . . but, come to think about it, why would I do that?

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/25/opinion/25wilson.html>? Cited 31 October 2009.

² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/religion/6424562/Senior-Anglican-bishop-reveals-he-is-ready-to-convert-to-Roman-Catholicism.html>; cited 31 October 2009.

³ *Ibid.*

I don't believe the Anglican experiment is over, but if it were, why should that be such an appalling prospect for us? If John isn't being fed in his current spiritual home – if it is no longer life-giving for him – and he wants to be formally received by the great tradition of Roman Catholicism, what sort of friend would I be to try and restrain him? Is my own need for him to prop up the institutional expression of my own ecclesial belonging greater than his need for wholeness, and thus the Church catholic's need for holiness? I hope not.

'Disgruntled' Anglicans – even some 'gruntled ones' – have been crossing the Tiber for centuries; and there has been plenty of traffic in the other direction. On this day two years ago three Roman Catholic members of this congregation were episcopally received into the Anglican Church of Australia, my wife Leanne among them. Happy anniversary – although you're probably wondering whether there's a 'cooling off period'?!

Of course, as has been pointed out, the big difference here is that “this new Apostolic Constitution shifts the ground from individuals to groups”.⁴ At best, this means that those who have been formed by Anglican liturgical instincts and spirituality and who seek to preserve these within a shared journey of discipleship and fellowship can have such a transition duly ordered, without fearing ecclesial exile. At worst, it suggests that the only 'real Anglicans' in the eyes of Rome are those who, in seeking refuge under its wings, are, as Andrew McGowan puts it,

driven not so much by ecumenical zeal or real engagement with the life and faith of the Catholic Church, but by dogged adherence to positions on gender roles and human sexuality which tend to bespeak a broader conservatism.⁵

What has thus been described in the secular press as a “Battle for the Soul of Two Churches”,⁶ is, I would suggest, a wider ecumenical battle to do with how we recognise not only other Christians as Christians, but other churches *as churches*: can we see and affirm the presence of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church in St Joseph's and St Peter's around the corner, and St Helen & St Constantine's, and the Swedish Church, and Toorak Uniting, and our Presbyterian neighbours and the South Yarra Community Baptist Church? And will our own church's structures allow – even encourage – us to do so?

Ecumenism is not an ecclesial form of globalization: the 'McDonald-isation' of religion. Please God let us not all become the same. Just as our humanity is never abstract, but is always embodied and enculturated in particular times and places, so too our faith is embodied, enculturated in particular 'small-t' traditions, which give form to the 'capital-T' Tradition, or Gospel.

All Saints' Day reminds us that the church is, in essence, people, not structures: a collection of overlapping stories gathered around that one story of God's action and character in Christ. Of course, as a human community, it is also an institution, because where two or three are gathered, there is politics! But as the late John Gaden would have said, sometimes we need to 'hang loose' to the institution.⁷

⁴ Charles Sherlock, <http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=17230>; cited 31 October.

⁵ www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=17231; cited 31 October.

⁶ Diarmaid MacCulloch, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/diarmaid-macculloch>; cited 31 October.

⁷ From a collection of private papers.

Which is why, if and when the Anglican experiment is finally over – and if we really mean what we say when we pray ‘thy kingdom come’, then we must expect and hope that it will one day have served its purpose in the divine economy – then hopefully we will rejoice with other Christians in what a quaint and glorious experiment it has surely been – ‘wonderful and confessedly strange’,⁸ as one commentator has dubbed it – and move on with what God has next in store for his ever pilgrim people.

Today’s New Testament readings remind us that the work of creation is never finished, that God is constantly drawing, coaxing creation towards new creation, its source and goal in the risen Christ: the new Jerusalem; and God knows the old one is very much a work in progress. He who makes all things new, in the power of the One he called Father, summoned Lazarus out of the tomb and set him free from the constraints that bound him, that fixed him in death. Some things in us, some things in the church, need to die, in order that we might live.

Walter Brueggeman invites us to share with all the saints in the purity of heart which is, paradoxically, a sort of ‘double-mindedness’, in his prayer, ‘We treasure what you end’:

We confess that we are set today in the midst of your awesome, awful work.
We will, because we have no alternative, be present this day
to your dreadful work of termination.
We will watch while you pull down and dismantle
that with which you are finished.
We will, because we have no alternative, be present today to your dream-
filled work of evoking, imagining, forming, and inviting.
We are double-minded in your presence, because we treasure what you end
and we fear what you conjure –
but we are you people and trust you all this day in your awesome, awful work.
Override our reluctance and take us with you in justice and mercy and peace.
Take us with you in your overriding,
that our day may be a day of joy
and well-being and newness from your very hand.
In the name of your decisive newness, even Jesus. Amen.⁹

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⁸ The ‘sur-title’ of a collection of essays in *Australian Anglican Ecclesiology*, edited by Bruce Kaye (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2006).

⁹ As cited by David Smith, in *Moving towards Emmaus: Hope in a time of uncertainty* (London: SPCK, 2007), 104.