

Changing Attitude Australia 'Mid-winter' Eucharist; CCSY 20 July 2007

Gen 18:1-8; Matt 12:1-8

“On not wearing one’s father’s hat”

To adapt an old joke about clergy and light-bulbs: how many Anglicans does it take to change an attitude? ... *Change?! The church has its own technical term for ‘adaptation’: we call it ‘tradition’. Pablo Picasso is credited with the aphorism, “tradition is having a baby; it is not wearing your father’s hat.”*¹

As an artist, Picasso clearly drew on sources that functioned as authorities for him – Catalan modernism, Cezanne’s geometric planes. Yet his role in the emergence of Cubism shows he also understood that, as a steward of this heritage, his task was not to simply hand on something inert: something that had, as it were, passed by him, unchanged, rather than through him, shaped and coloured by present experience – experience that was never simply private, despite being deeply personal: the Spanish Civil War; the intimacy he knew with Dora Maar.

The Judeo-Christian understanding of tradition, likewise, has never been one of simply donning an odd or ill-fitting garment, no matter how good the intentions with which it was bequeathed. Were it not so from the outset, there would be no *Talmud* to dance around *Torah* in robust mutual accountability; nor would there be four canonical and goodness knows how many non-canonical portraits of Jesus’ dying and living, with all of their illuminating dissonance and resonance. Were it not so in our *own* generation, Jenny would not be presiding for us this-evening.

Tradition is not static, fixed body of stuff; tradition is a force, a process – “it’s a livin’ thing” in the immortal words of ELO.² At once creative and conservative, it has been described variously by theologians as a ‘stream’ in which we live and move,³ or a ‘galaxy’ with its own gravitational pull.⁴ More famously, G. K. Chesterton called it ‘the democracy of the dead’⁵ – a notion helpfully qualified by church historian, Jaroslav Pelikan, who writes, ‘tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.’⁶

In the gospel reading set for today, conflict over sabbath observance follows on immediately from Jesus’ claim that those who labour in his service will find *rest*. By contrast, so Matthew would have his readers see, the Pharisees make the day of rest a burden by their interpretation of the law. Is the evangelist anticipating Theodore Adorno’s principle of ‘knowing one’s tradition in order to hate it properly’?⁷ Certainly Jesus knows his well enough to be in searching dialogue with it.

¹ As cited by David Tacey in an address to the Victorian Association for Religious Education, 28 October, 2003; online: <http://www.aare.org.au/victoria/tacey.html>; cited 10/07/07.

² ‘Living Thing’ was the title of a 1970s Pop song by Electric Light Orchestra.

³ Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 20.

⁴ Delwin Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitations: Tradition and Theological Construction* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 76-77.

⁵ *The Ethics of Elfland*, as cited by Nigel Forde in *A Motley Wisdom* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), 271.

⁶ *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 65.

⁷ As cited by Gordon Preece, ‘The Democracy of the Dead’, *Interface* 9.1&2 (2006): 52-75, 67.

But at no point does he step outside it, in arguing for a different application of its teaching. In this exchange Jesus doesn't trivialise sabbath law; he affirms it – provided it is used to discover and rediscover in every circumstance God's will, namely the practice of mercy.

Nor is the 'something greater than the temple' claimed for Matthew's Jesus a trump card by which the temple and all it represents may be dismissed. The temple, built by Solomon in the tenth century before the Common Era, was, after a series of desecrations and restorations, finally destroyed within living memory for much of Matthew's first audience.

Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple underscores its almost sacramental quality for Israel: 'I have built [the LORD] an exalted house, a place . . . to dwell in for ever' [1 Ki 8:13]. As a sign of God's covenantal grace and faithfulness, its repeated violation and eventual destruction was a devastating blow to Jewish self-understanding – the evolution of which helped forge the identity of both the early church, and Pharisaic Judaism. The sacrificial system of worship out of which these near and rivalrous siblings are born had become inadequate to the circumstances of the temple's demise. To function as the living faith of the dead, therefore, that tradition needed to be reverently interrogated and faithfully reappropriated.

As one reception and recasting of this tradition, then, early Christian rhetoric that relativised the centrality of the temple reflects the church's emerging conviction that Jesus himself is the manifestation of God's presence. Just as ministering to God's presence in the temple took precedence over a certain reading of sabbath law for the priests, so does ministering to God's presence in the Son of man for Jesus' disciples. Thus they can and must reinterpret – not only when they are in a situation of need, as David was, but also and primarily when their vocation demands it. Being lord of the sabbath does not mean the Son of man has power to overrule it. Rather, for Matthew, the Son of man has the authority to fulfill the sabbath – the day above all others, as the pinnacle of creation, on which God's desire for mercy is to be known and met.

Any such strong reading of tradition is risky. Childbirth, I'm reliably told, is painful and dangerous, for both mother and baby. In its wrestling with tradition, Matthew's community knew great conflict with its near neighbours in synagogue; and, in historical terms at least, Jesus paid dearly for his reading of *Torah*.

One historian accused the 1865 General Convention of the Episcopal Church of 'abhorring . . . schism more than [human] suffering',⁸ after the House of Bishops repeatedly refrained from addressing the question of race relations in pastoral letters. This oversight – pun intended – resulted in a mass exodus of African Americans from Episcopalian congregations.

That same church today clearly regards schism as the lesser violence. And were we a federation of churches, in which each member is autonomous to the point of being uniquely responsible for its own stewardship of tradition, this would be an entirely unremarkable decision – a prophetic stance that a number of us, I suspect, would support.

⁸ Gardiner H. Shattuck, as cited in *To Set Our Hope on Christ: A Response to the Windsor Report ¶135* (New York: The Office of Communications, the Episcopal Church Centre, 2005), §3.9.

Our difficulty, however, is that we belong not to a federation but to a communion of churches, in which the legitimate autonomy of each, as the Dean of one Episcopalian seminary, Philip Turner, explains, is “properly exercised only within the constraints of a wider fellowship of common belief and practice”.⁹ In this expression of catholicity, we shape and reshape tradition in the light of present experience that is deeply personal, but never private. Peter Sherlock puts it this way in a recent article:

The question of human sexuality reaches beyond the . . . person and the parish. I believe it has now become the key metaphor in the Anglican Church for revealing what we think about . . . salvation, the interpretation of Scripture [a subset of tradition], and the whole reason for existing as a church.¹⁰

If we imagine that the worst form of violence we could perpetrate on the body of Christ is schism, then the mutual hospitality implied in Turner’s vision of Anglicanism becomes thoroughly self-serving, and – as Peter implicitly warns – we exist as a church, ultimately, for the sake of existing as a church. I love Anglicanism, but there are more satisfying things to idolise!

You may recall a cartoon by Ron Tanberg in *The Age* following the Anglican Primates’ request to the Provinces of Canada and the United States that they withdraw from the Anglican Consultative Council on account of their reading of tradition on questions of sexuality. It showed two male clergy leaving the grounds of a church, hand in hand, while a group of angry clerics shout: ‘Come out and *stay* out!’¹¹

Establishing who’s ‘out’ (in the sense of being outside) has not, hitherto, been a typically Anglican practice. Rather, we are most fully our ecclesial *selves* – that is to say we ‘come out’ as Anglicans: gay and straight – precisely when we find ways of ‘staying in’ communion. This is because, as, Turner puts it:

Anglicans have taken the view that unity is a prime aspect of the nature of the church itself. . . . For this reason, the way in which division is addressed within the [] life of the church is not tangential to the Gospel’s proclamation but central to it.¹²

As those for whom this belief – indeed all belief – is formed and informed by worship, this and every Eucharist is one such means of addressing the conflict that is essential to the life of any tradition, evangelically. For here our wrestling with tradition is joined to Christ’s own, including its costliness. Here we learn from that sacrifice to desire, receive, and practice mercy, until there are no outsiders. Here we taste and foretaste sabbath rest as God’s will for us and all creatures, in unlikely communion with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And here we participate in the risky, *prophetic* hospitality shown by Abraham in our first reading, who stands and waits by his guests while they eat, thereby opening himself and his household to the unimaginable demands they proceeded to make – which, as the story goes, was something to do with having a baby.

⁹ ‘Introduction: Unity, Obedience, and the Shape of Communion’, in Ephraim Radner and Turner (eds), *The Fate of Communion: The Agony of Anglicanism and the Future of a Global Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006): 1-11, and here at 4.

¹⁰ ‘On Being a “Gay Anglican”’, *Interface* 9.1&2 (2006): 117-125, and here at 119.

¹¹ 26 February, 2005, ‘Insight’, 5.

¹² Turner, ‘Introduction’, 4.