

Anglican Spirituality

An essay by the 25th Presiding Bishop on Anglican Spirituality

We experience around us a yearning for meaning in the face of life's precariousness. The signs are everywhere. This yearning is variously addressed in ways both healthy and unhealthy, more and less effective. Attention to the life of the spirit is among them. Unfortunately, some of this attention is in the nature of a passing fancy, unmoored from the received tradition or the wisdom of the ages. Our Anglican heritage is a rich treasure for us in these times, to take ever more deeply to ourselves, and to share with a searching world.

Anglican spirituality is a fruit of our profoundly incarnational theology, and has to do with what the 18th century priest-mystic, William Law, calls "the process of Christ." Through daily encounters with the risen One in word and sacrament, and in the events and circumstances that challenge and mold us, we are transformed and conformed to the pattern of Christ.

Anglican spirituality places an emphasis on the developmental nature of grace and therefore attends carefully to time. The day, the week, the season, the year, the span of a person's life are all ordered to the "process of Christ." Put differently, Christ happens to us over time. The One who makes use of water, bread and wine to mediate his presence can make use of the stuff of our lives and relationships to address us and draw us more deeply into his life, death, and resurrection.

For Anglicans, our various prayer books provide for the ordering of time in such a way that we meet Christ in the unfolding of our lives both personally and corporately. Baptism--whether as infants, or as adults after a lengthy catechumenate--constitutes our being "born again," our being incorporated in Christ's risen body by sharing symbolically in his dying and rising. From that point on, until the moment of our actual death, we are growing in maturity in Christ. [Ephesians 4: 13] As St. Augustine of Hippo put it "we become who we are," namely extensions of Christ in time and space by virtue of our being limbs of his body, the Church, of which he is the head. The eucharist, then, becomes the sign and symbol of our "growing up into Christ." It represents one regular and sustained encounter with Christ in the power of the Spirit.

Because Jesus Christ is the incarnate and glorified Word of God, fundamental to all spirituality is the capacity and willingness on the part of persons of faith to listen. "Oh that today you would hearken to his voice!" we are counseled in Psalm 95, which is used throughout the Anglican Communion as an Invitatory at Morning Prayer. As each day begins we are invited to listen to the words and events which lie ahead "as those who are taught." [Isaiah 50: 4]

Because Christ is the Word of God, it is Christ who addresses us through the word of Holy Scripture. Indeed the Bible broadly conceived is a sacrament: it is "alive and active, sharper than a two edged sword" because Christ is alive and active and truly present in the scriptural word. The risen One who opened the scriptures to his downcast disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24) continues to make our hearts burn within us as the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, draws from what is Christ's (John 16: 14) and makes it known to us in the context of our own life and experience. The fact that Jesus had more to "say" to his disciples than they could presently bear or assimilate (John 16: 12) makes it clear that God's word in Christ continues to "go forth" in its ever creative potentiality, and to reveal new meaning and to speak to new situations in our lives personally and as communities of faith with our distinctive cultures, histories, and challenges.

In Hebrew "word" carries with it notions of occurrence as well as speech. Words therefore happen; they take place. The sacraments and sacramental rites are therefore enacted words

whose force and power once again derive from the risen One. "You have revealed yourself to me, O Christ, face to face. I have met you in your sacraments." These bold words of St. Ambrose underscore the formative and developmental effect of our sacramental participation in season and out of season, and at the different turnings of our lives.

Listening to the Word who is Christ also involves listening to our lives, to the events and circumstances, momentous and ordinary. Each and all are shot through with meaning. We are required as well to listen to the continuously unfolding life and experience of our national churches and the larger Anglican and world communion of which we are a part. Our careful listening to one another moves, then, from an expression of polite interest to a theological enterprise of the first order.

In the Acts of the Apostles we are told how "the word of God "spread" and "grew mightily" [13:49; 19:20] and how the apostles safely circumscribed world of 1st century Judaism was turned upside down and inside out by manifestations of Christ and the Holy Spirit in unlikely and high problematical circumstances which defied all precedence and reduced the apostolic community to proclaiming, "for it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." (Acts 15:28)

Anglican spirituality also involves a "graced pragmatism," a reasonableness conformed to the mind of Christ, a capacity for "testing the spirits" (1 John 4:1) of our contemporary world and existence in order to hear and be faithful to Christ the Word who can speak and reveal himself in the scripture of our own lives and experience as well as the Bible, the sacraments, and the ongoing life of the Church.

As we live "the process of Christ" and "become who we are" our most ordinary and seemingly random experiences give intimations of the divine. This is the gift of Anglican spirituality— our gift to receive with gratitude, and to share.

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