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## UNIMPAIRED TO OUR POSTERITY

When I first came to St. John's as Priest Assistant in 1997, I had no idea that I would still be here nine years later, still less that I should become its Rector. And having served under William Ralston and Michael Carreker for those nine years, I am not sure that there has not been some mistake! They are two of the most remarkable priests I am ever likely to know; remarkable for their intellectual gifts and academic attainments, remarkable too for the passionate commitment and deep feeling they brought to pastoral ministry in this parish: Fr. Ralston, perhaps the last Christian humanist in the Episcopal clergy; Fr. Carreker, a profound and equally rare student of the Augustinian theological tradition: both of them superb teachers and pastors, whose exceptional virtues were perhaps too familiar to us at St. John's to be fully recognized for what they were. We are fortunate that Michael will continue to serve the Lord and his Church as priest and teacher, in the academic world – a place where his gifts and vocation are as much needed as in the parish.

For both of these priests, the center of their pastoral and priestly ministry was fidelity to the "faith once delivered to the saints", for which they did "earnestly contend" (Jude 3). In an age that blithely embraced the most dubious innovations, they were faithful stewards of the great legacy of faith and wisdom, of truth and beauty, which has been handed down to us through countless generations: faithful stewards, because they did not regard this legacy as a matter of individual taste and private enjoyment, but as something of the highest importance for all, as something to be shared through the communion of saints. "I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you" (I Corinthians 11.23, cf. 15.3). What has been given to us by God in nature and in grace, through Plato and Saint Paul, through Augustine, Dante, Bach, and T. S. Eliot, is given that it may be received, and that it may be handed on. Not to receive it is one failure; not to hand it on is another.

At the center of their pastoral ministry was a conviction about the Book of Common Prayer, first published in 1549, whose last authentic American version is that of 1928. Fr. Ralston was prominent from the late 1970's onwards for his fearless defense of the Prayer Book, at a time when it was being suppressed or abandoned in the Episcopal Church; and Fr. Carreker continued in this uncompromising commitment. Their conviction was that the Prayer Book was the preeminent expression of the spiritual core of Anglican Christianity. To abandon the Prayer Book was to lose sight of what it means to be

Anglican Christians.

Theirs was the view which I (as a Canadian Anglican) recognized, because it was expressed in one of the foundational documents of the Canadian Church, the Solemn Declaration of 1893. It affirms the essential elements of ancient Catholic tradition – the Catholic Church, Scriptures, Creeds, Sacraments, Apostolic Orders – and then goes on to affirm the Anglican expression of that tradition, as set forth in the Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. This, says the declaration, “we are determined by the help of God to hold and maintain...and to transmit the same unimpaired to our posterity.”

I can boast that the Canadian Church possesses so noble a declaration in its constitution, but I happily admit that there is nothing particularly Canadian about it! It is simply a classical Anglican view, which could easily have been said by American, English, or Australian Anglicans. Indeed, the recent constitutional amendments of the Anglican Church of Nigeria take essentially the same stance. And it is certainly the view at St. John’s Church in Savannah.

To much of the contemporary church, even to many ‘conservatives’, such views seem quaint, irrelevant, or positively evil. It is thought self-evident that the ‘new and improved’ liturgies produced by contemporary liturgical experts are to be preferred to the ‘archaisms’ of the Prayer Book. Indeed, ‘liturgical renewal’ became a codeword for getting rid of the Prayer Book. The question they never seem to consider is whether that preference for the ‘new and improved’ is particularly Christian, or if it is not rather a kind of conformity to secular modes of thought.

To be sure, there must be changes, as there always have been: but the question is: of what kind. Wholesale, rapid change, even for the better, can be dangerously demoralizing and destabilizing to the Church. Open-ended adoption of every fad and fashion, such as we have experienced in the Episcopal Church, can leave us with nothing but an empty husk of religion. It certainly sows a bitter harvest of anger, division, schism, and heresy. It is just one of many ironies in the contemporary Church, that those who have recklessly promoted or passively accepted open-ended innovation then complain that controversy is impeding the Church’s mission!

If Christianity has always involved change, it is also characterized by a stubborn holding to tradition. For instance, in the 2nd century, when new ‘scriptures’ (like the Gospel of Judas) were being composed and proposed to the Church as vehicles for the docetic and dualistic religious ideas known to scholars as Gnosticism, the Church not only rejected those scriptures as inauthentic – having no historical connection through the apostles to Jesus and no resemblance to his teaching – but also began to collect into a ‘canon’ the authentic apostolic writings. We call that collection the New Testament. The early Church did not embrace change that would betray its tradition, but chose to change in ways that would clarify and strengthen its tradition. For Christianity, tradition is the matrix of authentic renewal. The more deeply we put down our roots in tradition, the more fruitful we become.

Will there be changes at St. John’s Church in Savannah? To be sure; as there have always been – as when Fr. Ralston introduced ‘high church’

touches of ceremonial into our worship, as when Fr. Carreker provided the impetus to convert the ugliest church school in Chatham County into the handsome and commodious structure now named Cranmer Hall. But, God willing, they will be changes that seek to maintain the highest degree of continuity with what has gone before, while clarifying, strengthening, and deepening our life in that tradition. "We are determined by the help of God to hold and maintain... and to transmit the same unimpaired to our posterity."

**The Rev'd. Gavin G. Dunbar**



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