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NO THERE THERE

NO THERE THERE

Till this fall you could go to All Saints Church in Granville Centre, near Annapolis Royal in Nova Scotia. Though begun in 1789 by the first bishop of Nova Scotia, the loyalist Charles Inglis, a new cornerstone was laid in 1814, and after more delays the building was consecrated in 1826. That is not old as some measure it, but it places it in the critical years of early settlement in Nova Scotia. It was not a great work of architecture, yet there was dignity, proportion, and neatness of classical detail which made it pleasing to the eye. It took its place in the fertile farming landscape of the Annapolis valley with humble grace and nobility of spirit that few buildings of our time ever manage. It was in its own way emblematic of the high ideals and holy ambitions that shaped the mission of the Church of England (as it then was) in Nova Scotia.

Now, however, even as I write, the building is being dismantled and sold, it is reported, to a Baptist conventicle in Louisiana. The irony of its fate would not have been lost on Bishop Inglis, who designed churches like All Saints as part of an effective strategy to stem the tide of revivalism whose extravagances threatened to wash away the rational and ordered forms of the Christian religion. Now it is his own heirs in the Anglican Diocese of Nova Scotia who have sold All Saints Church to theirs.

This decision is represented as a sad necessity, an adjustment to rural depopulation and deep declines in church attendance. This sadness, we are told, is tempered by the thought that the building will find continued use for Christian worship elsewhere, and by the existence of other early churches in the area, some of them from the 18th century (though two other churches in the area have been demolished in recent years.)

Sad acceptance of necessary change is certainly a plausible response: plausible, but perhaps not in the final analysis convincing. In an age when clergymen go to seminars to learn how to "manage change" these expressions of "sadness" deserve to be probed a little more deeply. I am told that it was on Canadaly this year that the demolition of All Saints was mooted; and when the local heritage society began a dialogue with the parish and Diocese of Nova Scotia seeking alternatives that would preserve the building on its site, these went nowhere, for reasons that look rather like technicalities. The "sadness"

would carry more weight if the Diocese had tried a little harder to keep it, or had displayed a greater sense of what is being lost in Nova Scotia's landscape and history, or to the Diocese's rural mission. But it is no secret that the Diocese has been trying to close small country churches for years, in a drive to "rationalize physical plant" and (supposedly) "revitalize mission". One former bishop used to joke about arson as the solution to their problems, and there is no sign that the outlook has changed. The utilitarian logic of a fast-food franchise is applied to the Church; and the decision to do so is presented as an inexorable necessity.

Why all this fuss about the dismantling of a little country church in Nova Scotia? Because it is emblematic of something much bigger: the forty years in which Anglican and Episcopalian churches in North America have been dismantling and disowning their own heritage, not just architectural, but also liturgical, doctrinal, moral and pastoral. The churches have turned away from their own history with patronizing tokenism, chilling indifference, or outright hostility.

How does one respond to the diremption of spiritual patrimony? With sadness, yes: but not sadness as technique for securing acquiescence to what is wrong. At the presence of evil "Jesus wept", but he also got angry (cf. Mark 3:5, 8:12; John 11:38). In the church's moral teaching, an inability to feel indignation at the presence of evil is not a virtue but a defect. In the face of this loss, sadness alone may well be a dysfunctional response, the sign of an inability to resist evil.

Gertrude Stein said that "The trouble with Oakland [California] is that when you get there, there isn't any there there." Whether this is fair to Oakland, I do not know. But too often it describes the state of the Anglican and Episcopal Churches in North America today: too often, when you go looking for Anglican Christianity, what you find, like All Saints Granville Centre, is vacancy; a spiritual patrimony diminished and diluted, dismantled and disowned. More and more, "there isn't any there there". Perhaps classical Anglicanism was not designed for blockbuster success in our time: but the eagerness to abandon this patrimony is indecent, and for what?

At St. John's, by the blessing of God we continue to flourish, not without compromise, not without faults, determined to hand on to our posterity unimpaired that which we have received. This is cause for thanksgiving and hope. In the providence of God, we know that such efforts, however quixotic they may appear, are not in vain. But there is no question that this effort entails a alienation from the church of managed change and theological revolution. There will be sadness, and there will be indignation: not to respond in these ways would be no virtue.

GGD

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