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The Third Sunday after Epiphany

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REFORMED & CATHOLIC

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In last week's Parish Paper I wrote about the calling to catholicity which was intrinsic to the Gospel of the Epiphany – a calling to unity in the truth and charity of Christ, in his body, the Church. I wrote about the different aspects of that commitment to catholicity, such as evangelism, and reconciliation with Christians in other denominations, and in our own. I would add at least one more dimension: a reconciliation to Christian history, both catholic and reformed.

One of the distinctive features of late Anglicanism was the parties that arose out of the 18th century Evangelical revival and the 19th century Catholic revival. At times locked in partisan conflict, they nonetheless testified to Anglicanism's debt to the past. Evangelicals looked to the 16th century Reformation, while Catholics looked to the traditions of the ancient and medieval church. The way in which they did so was often one-sided. Evangelicals jumped over the fifteen centuries between the apostles and Martin Luther (though acknowledging Augustine and Wycliffe), Catholics tended to jump straight from the 1530's (when Henry VIII broke with the papacy and dissolved the monasteries) to the 1830's (when John Keble's Assize sermon launched the catholic revival in the Church of England). Narrow, partisan, and shallow as these opposed accounts could be, they nonetheless did acknowledge the definitive claim of the Christian tradition on the present and future. For a long time, therefore, for all their deficiencies, Anglican evangelicals and catholics had an important role in anchoring Anglicanism against the tides of late modern secularism. It is significant that, at least in their inception, both revivals appealed to the historic Prayer Book (though more recently they have tended to abandon it.)

The continuing importance of these movements is to be measured by their relation to the "cuckoo in the nest" of late modern Anglicanism, the theological liberalism whose outlook is chiefly shaped by the contemporary culture of the autonomous, self-expressive individual, a culture in which all things are measured by their apparent relevance to subjective experience. In this late modern theological liberalism, revelation and tradition are regarded with suspicion. Nothing is permitted to challenge the sovereignty of the self. The only liberation which modern liberalism cannot offer is transcendence, the liberation from the prison of the self, the liberation to a good higher and greater than me. As a result of its assertion of the sovereignty of the self, this

theo-logical liberalism has been the primary solvent of Anglican community. A tyrannical liberal majority, indifferent to the Church's constitutional and historic commitments, has now appealed to the civil courts to enforce the community its own actions have destroyed.

In the face of this dissolution, the need for a catholic and evangelical voice in the church today is greater than ever. The strength of this voice will depend on the ability of catholics and evangelicals to root themselves more fully in the whole of theological history, ancient, medieval, and reformed. That means eschewing partisan advantage, the disparagement of each other's tradition, the transmission of one-sided and polemical mythologies. It means learning to attend respectfully to reformed and catholic voices, seeking a greater unity that is not based on the lowest common denominator or the disparagement of doctrine. Above all, I believe, it will mean rediscovering the historic Prayer Book as the true charter of Anglican community in which both can live with charity, humility, and a measure of self-restraint. In recent decades, Anglican catholics and evangelicals have formed various strategic alliances: a deeper, if incomplete unity, is there to be sought.

GGD

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar



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