

Anglican Identity and the Incarnation

Opening session

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At a meeting of the House of Bishops in recent years we were reminded by the bishop for Pastoral Development (at the time), Clay Matthews, about a survey of Episcopalians concerning our Anglican or Episcopalian identity. The survey included clergy and laity, congregations and dioceses. It was called “Around One Table: Exploring Episcopal Identity,” and its purpose is to explore such questions as: Who are we? What does it mean to be an Episcopalian? What are our core values? How are we differentiated from other faith traditions? What are our strengths and weaknesses? And so forth.

The survey results indicated that the following core values are at the top of our list: Sacramental, Book of Common Prayer, Christ is central, Scripture, Pastoral, Diverse positions, and on down the line. Third on the list, actually, is that we are incarnational. We see ourselves as incarnational.

And what Clay Matthews reminded us in that meeting, is that the survey revealed a gap – what he called an identity gap – between clergy and laity on this particular value. It was named as being very important to clergy; and not named by laity – although I believe laity intuit it as true. So, I thought that today we might spend a little time on this theological understanding of ourselves – a key understanding of our identity.

What is the meaning of the Incarnation? Why is it important? Why is it particularly attractive to Anglicans?

It has been said that each of the great Christian traditions (Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican) tends to emphasize a particular theological understanding. To the Eastern Orthodox, Easter is most emphasized. To the Roman Catholics, the sacrifice of Christ (the Passion) is most emphasized. To the Anglicans, the Incarnation is most emphasized.

To be clear, none of these great traditions is saying it's just the Passion, or just the Resurrection, or just the Incarnation which matters. We are talking about the lens through which we tend to look. Anglicans tend to be incarnational in outlook.

Incarnational theology. What does that mean? It's true that when we think of the Incarnation as an event which happened once upon a time in history, we are thinking of the birth of Jesus. We are referring to Christmas: the incarnation as the event which took place in a manger when the Word became flesh.

But, one can say (as I suspect most Christians say) that God was born into a sinful world one day 2000 years ago in a manger, and Mary and Joseph named the child Jesus. And Jesus grew up, and 30 years later got baptized, called disciples, and taught, and healed people, and then suffered betrayal, was crucified, buried, rose from the dead, and declared that he will come again – one can say all of that, and still not be operating out of what we mean by the term, incarnational theology.

I suspect many of you are familiar with Richard Rohr, a Franciscan monk and theologian. Rohr actually says that the first incarnation is creation itself. He says

most of the world religions claim something like this: “Everything that exists in material form is the offspring of some Primal Source, which originally existed only as Spirit. This Infinite Primal Source somehow poured itself into finite, visible forms, creating everything from rocks to water, plants, organisms, animals, and human beings – everything we see with our eyes.”

He says that this self-disclosure of God into physical creation was actually the FIRST incarnation, long before the personal, second Incarnation that Christians believe happened with Jesus. “To put this idea in Franciscan language, creation is the FIRST Bible, and it existed for 13.7 billion years before the second Bible was written.”

So, the Incarnation is not only “God becoming Jesus.” It is a much broader event. Long before Jesus’s personal incarnation, Christ was embedded in all things. An incarnational worldview sees the presence of the divine in everything and everyone.

This is not a new 21st century innovative idea. It is not “new age.” The Early Theologians of the Church – in their writings – insist on claiming the presence of the Divine in every human heart. In the second century, a great influential theologian, Justin Martyr, sees “Christ the Logos” as the “Cosmic Sower” who plants seeds – who plants “seeds of truth” in the hearts of all human persons – without exception.

Centuries later, Thomas Merton writes the following in his book “Guilty Bystander”: “At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin ..., a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely

to God "...It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it, we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of the sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely. ... I have no program for this seeing. It is only a given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere."

So we are created in the image of God (a fundamental starting point in Genesis) and it is our calling to grow in His likeness. Image and likeness. Created in the image of God. Deep within the heart the Divine Spark lives. And yet it's true, obviously, that each heart is greatly distorted by sin, and is covered with layers of fear and deception (and we could make a long list), and our calling is to grow in His likeness.

But according to Merton there remains within us this "innermost, secret, uncontaminated chamber of the heart ...where the winds of evil spirits do not blow." And this is "the locus of God's indwelling."

So while it's true that the "Word was made flesh" 2000 years ago in a manger, and it's true that Christ is the full revelation of God, and Jesus is the ultimate outward, visible sign of God's grace and love, an incarnational theology insists that the Divine Logos can be found in every human heart.

As the Anglican John Knox says (and this was written before we made our language inclusive), "Man was made in the image of God and will not be allowed to fail in the end to realize his true nature and destiny. Divinity is not merely above him and around him; it is also within him – indeed, it is the very essence of his inmost self."

So, this important claim about our identity – that we are incarnational – is in contrast to the theological culture, and likely in contrast to those with whom we are alienated. And whether long-time Episcopalians can articulate it or not (as the survey indicates), I believe it is something we intuit. After all, we have been marinated in incarnational prayers and worship.

Related to all of this, I believe, is our Celtic history and spirituality, which I would suggest is something more than a passing fad. I think it goes beyond our identity, and even to our DNA. I believe a case can be made that indigenous spirituality, history, and the land influence us for generations. That's what I mean by DNA. And I wonder if our own recent schism in Fort Worth resembles an event in Celtic history over 13 centuries ago called the Council of Whitby. If we recall the story of the spread of Christianity throughout Celtic lands, Christian evangelization did NOT erase the “nature mysticism” of pre-Christian religion, but rather, transformed it. The Gospel was seen as fulfilling, rather than destroying, old Celtic mythologies.

It is said that “Christ had always been the Celts’ teacher, but they had not known him by name.” So, the nature mysticism of the pre-Christian Druidic religion was not destroyed. It was transformed. (Philip Newell)

As Christianity spread in the Celtic world, monasteries popped up. And these Celtic monasteries had men and women as the Celts did not share the fear of sexuality with the established church. Women shared in the role of leadership. One particular woman – St Brigid – is seen as Ireland’s mother saint: the Abbess of

Kildare. The word “kildare” means “church of the oak groves” and oak groves had been the sacred places of Druids. Again, transformed – not destroyed.

At any rate, the mission of the established church of Rome and the mission of the Celtic Church had been separate for about 200 years. Around the year 600, as Rome re-established itself and moved north, and as the Celtic mission moved south into Britain, it was a matter of time before this separation would end. How would they co-exist? Or, will they co-exist?

As the established church consolidates power, and as Augustine’s theology about human nature (depravity) continues to carry the day, and as celibacy for priesthood begins to gain traction (thus widening the separation of males and females in leadership roles) [and while it’s true that it was in the 11th century before priests had to pledge celibacy, as early as the third century it was decreed that any priest who slept with his wife the night before Mass would lose his job]... [while that is happening] within the Celtic mission there is a growing emphasis on the goodness of creation, clergy are permitted to marry, the distinction between clergy and lay is not hard and fast, and women (while not ordained) DO hold leadership roles in the Church. Tensions grow between Rome and Celtic.

Finally, in 664 a synod is convened at the monastery of Abbess Hilda in Whitby. At stake: the futures of two distinct types of spirituality which had come into conflict and were vying for supremacy.

The bishop arguing the case for the Celts appealed to the authority of St John, as the disciple who leaned against Jesus at the Last Supper, and who heard the heartbeat of Jesus. (I’m taking this from Philip Newell).

The other argument appealed to the authority of St Peter, to whom Jesus said, “thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church.” And the king would not contradict Peter. The establishment wins. The Celtic worldview goes underground.

Celtic theology and spirituality have continued to re-surface throughout history. It seems to me that it continues to threaten or scare many of us as it re-surfaces. Maybe that happened with us. I’m not a psychologist.

But I do believe Celtic Christianity is in our DNA, however distant. It looks to the essential goodness of humanity. It is incarnational.

So, let’s look at the contrast for a moment.

The religion of our local culture: low anthropology – depravity of man, God is revealed in the Bible, low church, atonement is located on the cross, salvation when we die, exclusive view of world religions.

Episcopalians: created in the image of God, God revealed in Word AND Sacrament (creation) (our liturgies express what we believe), atonement located in the entire Christ event including Pentecost, church participates in God’s mission (high church), reconciliation, inclusive (many rooms in the mansion).

Thoughts? Clarifications? Together again? Ways we talked passed one another?
Meeting people where they are?

So, during the past couple of years we have put together a draft theological statement to inform our process toward post-litigation life.

God is a Divine Community of Persons. God's vision for humankind is Holy Communion with God and one another.

What are we called to do?

As Living Members of the Risen Body of Christ we are called to participate in God's mission to restore us to communion.

How do we do that?

In Jesus we see (and experience) undeserved forgiveness, unmerited grace, and unconditional love. In the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus we see "how" we are called to do it: love. In Jesus "how" means everything. For example, the ends do not justify the means.

Why do we do this?

We do this because we are witnesses to the power of God's love to change lives – even to raise the dead to new life.

What is the community that results from this?

They will know we are Christians by our love – for one another, for those who persecute us, even for enemies. This is also community with boundaries and respect for differences. Sometimes the way we show respect for the dignity of others is by being as "wise as serpents" or "shaking the dust from our feet."

At its heart, this is a community where all members of the Body of Christ offer gifts, are valued, and are needed.

Restoration of relationships is a high priority. What does that mean? What might it mean to our identity? What it might not mean?

Resurrection is something different from resuscitation. I would suggest we couldn't be restored to the same old body if we tried. And we are not called to that.

We are called to something new – a new body, a new life. How might that inform our congregations as we engage congregational discernment?

This is a “draft” theological statement. (I believe all theological statements ought to be drafts.) What should be added to the draft? Janet has pointed out that it has nothing to say about stewardship, and how we are called to be stewards. Any thoughts on that?