

Theme: Why encouragement for North American Parishes and Dioceses matters?

I am the fourth speaker in a series that covers these important questions,

Why:

- Covenant still matters?
- Instruments still matter?
- Reconciliation in the midst of conflict matters?
- Mission and Theological Education for Communion matters?

There are numerous background issues and specific historical factors that probably need a quick review—what role does a solemn declaration have in ACoC; does TEC have a basically diocesan polity by constitution and canon; what happened at GC 2012 in respect of SS blessing rites and how has that morphed into other things on the ground; is ‘extra-provincial’ a Communion-warranted category (approved at Dar Es Salaam) available for dioceses like SC which find themselves isolated in the province in which they were located.

But I want instead to begin with a more simple illustration, the now typical ‘story’ that introduces the Sunday morning sermon. I do this because to use the word ‘encouragement’ is to point to the fact that for conservative Anglicans it is no longer about serious debates, or theological arguments, or a proper liturgical understanding of this or that new rite.¹ Rather, it is about the more basic question of continuance in a church that in many serious ways no longer resembles itself through time. Conservatives have become strangers—in worry or in fact—in their own church, because time marches on and the claim is made that as it does it makes “ancient good uncouth” (as the hymn puts it). That may look slightly different on the ground in Canada—more polite, perhaps—but here the Episcopal and Anglican counterparts in NA face I think the same basic challenge. Our vocation is to live in God’s time and that will require suffering, confusion, and struggle to preserve what we hold true as the friction with another account of time—in culture and in the church—is increasingly great.

For the last three months I have been working on a commentary on the prophet Joel on a grant from the German foundation Alexander von Humboldt, in Lower Saxony, at the University of Goettingen. My preferred pattern is to take long walks in the afternoon to clear my head and to think through how I want to return to the next block of writing. My setting for this was ideal, for next to our rented house was a grand forest full of logging roads and more basic forest paths. At

¹ No term is perfect. By conservative I mean traditional, conserving what has come before, in evangelical catholic Anglicanism. I hope the term is congenial as a shorthand if nothing else.

times, when I started exploring, the forest world be so dark I had to get my bearings by listening for the train on its regular back and forth from Hannover north and Frankfurt south, or by searching for a massive communication tower that stood at the top of the forest preserve and towered over it. *Only when one knows the paths and roads well can one relax enough to move forward with confidence and freedom of mind.*

In thinking about this talk, my mind wandered to the same setting in snow. Having learned the paths and recognized the familiar clues, the same daily hikes would be a pleasure, now cloaked in the white powder of God's glorious raiment.

For many conservatives or traditional Anglicans, we are being beckoned to leave the paths we and our forebears have travelled. We see enthusiastic supporters and their cultural secular colleagues striking out on fresh trails. Their footprints are visible in the snowy detours from the main path. They may say with boldness and much conviction that here are Jesus' footprints as well. Either he blazed the trail in ways formerly we did not see; or it is his job perennially to encourage 'prophetic' trail-blazing and this is the warrant for striking out. We might pause to tease the distinction out here, but it isn't necessary at this juncture, given the enthusiastic conviction that the new paths are the main business of our common life, however much the older paths may remain selectively useful.

The question for conservatives, especially if a word like "encouragement" now points to the kind of vocation that is incumbent on us, is: Will we be allowed to travel the well-worn paths of our faith, mission, and common life? We find on the one side warrants for the new paths in calls for diversity and inclusion and that is fine. Our questions may take instead these forms:

1. We see your footprints in the snow and we note the trails you say are good ones, but if we are worried about them, and do not trust them, and are not sure they are safe trails, will we be allowed to remain on the paths we do know?
2. We have had to come to accept that you believe the urgent business of our church life is attention to the new trails of recent blazing, and that it is proper for our main energies to be focused here, and our disagreements with that over the past decades have now come to naught. We have been told that many of the paths we are travelling, which generations before us travelled, are wrong paths, have sell-by dates and time out, or are covered with overgrowth we simply do not acknowledge. But our question remains, is this so? And so now the urgent question is, will we be forced to rewrite the maps we have been given, we believe, by a Godly Savior, and join you where we, at least, do not hear his voice or see his foot prints, following this new map of recent vintage? If not, how will we find our common life in your midst? I suppose we may even be called 'Amish' and our mode of

‘buggy travel’ outmoded, but I doubt many of us care or agree with that, so long as we are not required out onto trails we do not trust.

3. A further practical question faces traditional Christians, given our Anglican identity. Many Christians who came to faith in the worldwide growth of this catholic/evangelical expression of the Gospel, did so with a map that resembles our own, and which is only different for reasons of local adaptation. This is not an assertion made by us on our behalf, but is indeed the way they see the matter themselves. They *recognize* our maps and worry as do we about what are for them even more clear and more worrying and more dangerous detours. If we are given space not to join you on the new paths, and are not required to try out the exciting new trails, where does that leave us with those who share a common map and a common concern about not departing from it? How is our Communion life and shared commitment to take concrete form?

I hope that by what I have said it is now no longer a matter of insisting that the new trails have no theological warrant we might all agree, and that therefore they are to be ruled out of our common life by means of measured debate. The time for that discussion is now past. Decisions have been made. Camp has been struck and the footprints in the snow bear present testimony to travel as a fact—indeed an exciting and promising fact—on the ground.

This also means we are in a new time. What was advocated for, fought for, and strategically brought about, is now here. In the same march of time to which we were called, against our wills and against our own sense of God’s time, we can now see a before and an after. We are not in the same time as ten years ago, or even five. In the march of this new time, with a new map, one group has brought about what they wished, and another group has been defeated, politically, in trying to preserve a former theological vision and inheritance. We are at a different place on the march of time than we previously were. The new time we have inherited turns out not to be monolithic—for that everyone needed to be a winner, excited to have a new map—but has hours and minutes after all. In the season we now inhabit, our theological convictions have not won the day or even been safeguarded, but have been set in the shade of present victories for the new map of new travelling. For how long will the former understanding—once held by all—still be possible to maintain?

This temporal fact may also be a genuinely ‘new thing’ even though it might not have been contemplated by those who have sought and won new trails to follow. Traditional Anglicans, operating on the basis of a common prayer, catechesis, scripture, pastoral rites, and mission, have “lost.” Lost, in the sense that if one believed there was a single rite and a single understanding of marriage (or the sacrament of Holy Communion), that is no longer so. The only question, one

supposes, is whether two different rites will exist side-by-side, which is itself a clear pointer to the defeat and to a different understanding of rites as such.

As a footnote, it was probably always the case that intermediate steps on such a quest for new maps, would never retain any integrity, if such they had in the first place. General Convention in TEC discovered it would not be possible to produce a supplemental liturgy even if they wanted to because the rules governing that could not be properly followed (they needed more bishops, especially retired ones, present for a vote). So we got a blessing rite of some description that each Bishop was to approve or disapprove. (The irony here is of course that this version of ‘diocesan polity’ was anathema in other areas of our common life).

In August—and this is but one example amongst many—a Seattle newspaper reported that a same-sex couple would be married in the Episcopal Cathedral there with a service out of the BCP. The couple—a Roman Catholic and a Methodist—were quoted as solemnly declaring that they didn’t want a service that was ‘made up.’

If one studied the affair closely, it appeared that the Bishop’s own statements about this service sought to clarify that it was a different kind of liturgy and not one out of the BCP. But here the very problem with new maps and new trails raises its head. For the couple and for the newspaper this only amounted to so much distracting footnoting. Isn’t even the new ‘intermediate period rite’ not out of the BCP anyway, they might counter, and not be all that wrong in so doing. Once the clutch is released on intermediary stages, one cannot really control the departures from the former, constitutional rite or say how they should stand still. Other forces come into play in the very nature of the case. That is what it means to blaze a trail – you cannot know for sure what will happen. Or, you know very much what will happen because you know where you want to get ahead of time and will be sure you arrive there in the end.

And so we are in a new time. This is no longer a time of advocacy and strategy, but of accomplishment and tidying up.

And so we find ourselves before the title assigned for this session. “Why encouragement for North American Parishes and Dioceses matters?” It matters because of where we are in time. New maps and new trails are the markers of our present time. We did not believe they were proper trails to follow, but the time of that conviction, in the practical terms of our common life, is drawing to a close. Others who were concerned have left already and have their own new trails to blaze in that choice. So it is time to shift the question—given the reality it correctly presupposes—to another, slightly different, formulation: ‘what would encouragement for parishes and dioceses look like?’ What form would it take?

We are an episcopal church—a church with Bishops and dioceses—so perhaps it is best to start there instead of with the question of parishes – which in this understanding only flows from it and cannot be taken therefore in isolation. It might be possible to speak of parishes independently of Bishops and Dioceses, but to do so would be to point to a state of affairs more *in extremis* than, I believe, even this new time is requiring.

Encouragement would take the form of allowing the *status quo ante* to remain among us. Not the starting of a new church, or a new province, with all the work that is required properly to do that: liturgies, provincial structures, new Prayers Books, fresh Constitutions and Canons. (This is another kind of ‘new time’ creation). It would mean allowing traditional Anglicans the space and right to hold on to the forms of Christian life they presently inhabit. If a new liturgical rite, a new metro-political PB, and probably a new constitution (in the case of TEC, reinforcing a new polity) are now part of the agenda of the new season, will dioceses and parishes be permitted to do what has been done up until this new time, as the church inhabited this time and space previously? The “conservative” in this instance, demurs any longer from comment on the new map—the time for that is now past; our disagreement is firmly in the record—because we are able to “conserve” what has been the church’s teaching, preaching, worship and mission and not be required to come out onto the new trails. Can Bishops be given oversight of parishes, if they exist in dioceses which wish to inhabit the new trails and new maps? Can dioceses which wish to conserve the patterns of worship and common life they have been inhabiting, be allowed to do so? If parishes in their midst wish to strike out on the new trails, they will be free to do so as well.

At issue here is the conviction that where the Anglican and Episcopal churches in North America have been *was then and remains still* a valid and trustworthy expression of the church catholic. A single rite for the sacramental blessing of a Christian marriage has been the practice of the church catholic, and it is found in the liturgical rites of Canadian and American Anglicans. Can this be retained as such, as a single rite? Those who wish to augment this, or replace this, will do so, and will determine for themselves which of these two trails, or others, is to be preferred. That would obviously no longer be the business of the minority of traditional ‘conservers.’

In the Episcopal Church, it may be necessary in time to do the work to alter the Constitution so as to warrant new understandings of the office of Presiding Bishop, General Convention’s relationship to church property, a new Prayer Book with new pastoral rites, or all of the above. I cannot speak about the Canadian counterpart, including things like the Solemn Declaration, which is itself tied into a self-understanding of a Church of England also in flux. If this happens (constitutional alteration), it would formally bring to an end any for-now arrangement of cordiality toward conservatives, such as is being here described. That is only logical, if those who wish to remain with the previous self-understanding indeed did so. They would then say

goodbye to erstwhile colleagues and fellow Anglicans, and would be parted in the same manner by those who wish to move out onto new trails and an embrace of convictions regarding sexuality, worship, mission, polity and other matters.

This ‘encouragement’ for parishes and dioceses, it can be argued, comes as a consequence of both sides acknowledging what is now a fact – and a hard-won one for those who have worked for this new time. We are in a new time. The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church in Canada want to move onto new trails with new maps, and they are boldly and enthusiastically so doing. The footprints clutter the snowy fields beyond the well-worn paths.

Can those of us who do not wish to strike out into this territory, and who have made our case against it and have been out-voted in our respective church contexts, be allowed to retain the paths and patterns of our life heretofore, which previously we all shared? Can we resolve to find the practical ways to do that for our new time, mindful that it might not last very long in any case, as new formal self-understandings take form to regulate a new life on new trails for those who out of conviction believe God is calling them to them? At the very least it would send a better signal to the world than the trail of litigation and expense we have witnessed in severe terms in the US. It would also help identify where Anglican Christians stand in this divide, so that our Communion friends could recognize and acknowledge us, morally if not more formally.

It would also hand back to God the time that is his own, and allow him to judge in the times that are in his hands, how he means to extend his church throughout the world. Let justice and mercy kiss each other, as conservative are permitted to remain on familiar trails, while the larger Episcopal and Anglican bodies in North America forge ahead where they believe God is calling them. If in time they part ways, at least it could happen in a spirit of charity and loving-kindness. That in my view is the opportunity this particular chapter in the new time allows us. Modest and taxed though it is, it might be a gift of encouragement to parishes and dioceses in North America.

As I have prayed about this talk and reflected on God’s time in scripture my mind has returned again and again to Isaiah and his words in chapter 8. “Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the House of Jacob, and in him will I hope.” The prophet was not exempt from this season. The LORD’s face was hidden from the House of Jacob, not individual rooms within it. So it was. So the waiting and hoping were sharpened on just this stone. This is where I believe we now are, and this is what encouragement for parishes and dioceses in North America now looks like. Waiting and trusting, as God hides his face for a season, for his own eternal and final purposes. As he remakes us all.