

## OUR INCARNATIONAL IDENTITY

Anglicans have always struggled with identity. What makes us Anglicans? How are we any different from other Christians? And what is unique about members of the Episcopal Church? We have often attempted to explain who we are by appealing to history and the 16<sup>th</sup> century Elizabethan Settlement. Indeed, the Church of England developed a unique character, at once both Catholic and Reformed. With the creation of the Episcopal Church in 1789, the Anglican tradition was fused with democratic values and American assumptions.

For years we have thought of ourselves as the “bridge church” and with some justification. Economically or socially upwardly mobile Protestants have tended to find a home in the Episcopal Church. Current research reminds us that our numbers include a significant population of former Roman Catholics. In more recent decades we have embraced social ministry and our newer identity seems to emphasize diversity, inclusion, engagement, and advocacy.

Although we affirm the Baptismal Covenant from the Baptismal liturgy and have touted the Lambeth Quadrilateral as a summary statement of core values, we don't consider ourselves a “Confessional” Church, that is, we don't have a definitive statement which summarizes our common life and forms boundary lines. At the same time, we do refer to the “Doctrine, Discipline, and Worship” of the Church as these things are enunciated in the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church.

Following the classic Latin saying, *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, (loosely translated, ‘As we worship, so we believe’), our faith tradition has claimed to find identity in our worship. If you want to get a handle on who we are and what “makes us tick”, then join in our worship. Our tradition of dignified, structured, sacramental worship, bonded with a strong sense of scripture and a ready engagement in the community represents our collective identity.

However significant all of this may be, it doesn't really acknowledge why we seem to have developed this distinctive blend of Christianity. In fact, we are the way we are because of our theological preferences. We tend to emphasize some beliefs and they in turn provide defining focus.

All of us were born with a natural preference for either using our right or left hand. In utero each of us somehow began to favor one or the other so that when we were born, we were already predisposed to be right handed or left handed. Such an orientation comes naturally to us and we tend to use our dominate hand for a multitude of tasks, including writing, throwing a ball, and working with tools.

Yet, the body was designed to feature four limbs- two legs and two arms/hands. All are important and in the words of St. Paul, all are honored and have their important function. Still, we have a preference for leading from the dominate hand.

So too, all Christians share in four essential beliefs or core doctrines. All are important and each complements the others. Yet all Christians have a preference for one of the four and that which dominates theological belief is consciously or unconsciously reflected in the Doctrine, Discipline and Worship of the church.

The first great doctrine of Christianity is the Resurrection. We believe that God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead and calls us to new life in his name. Belief in the Resurrection of Christ is at the very core of Christian witness and identity. It proclaims transcendence and transformation, not just after death, but indeed, in the present. For some Christians, this is their 'dominant' theological core value. For example, the great churches of the Orthodox tradition tend to project their worship and life through the Resurrection prism. Easter becomes their defining liturgical moment. Their worship features the mystical: icons and incense, cosmic transcendence, transformational spirituality. Anglicans also embrace these things. In fact, in recent decades we have been especially influenced by Orthodox liturgy and spirituality, as most clearly illustrated in our embrace of icons. Transformation is central to the Christian proclamation. It is also central to Christian life. Yet, even though Anglicans embrace the call to transformative living, the Resurrection has not been our dominant theological doctrine.

The second great belief of Christianity is the Doctrine of the Atonement. All Christians affirm the saving death of Jesus Christ on the cross. As most clearly defined by St. Paul in the Epistle to the Romans, we confess that we are sinners and cannot save ourselves by righteous deeds or good works. Rather, we are saved only by faith in Jesus Christ. The grace of the cross reconciles us to God and to each other. For the majority of the world's Christians, the doctrine of the Atonement is clearly their dominant theological core value. Both Catholics and Evangelicals are essentially "atonement" Christians. Evangelicals stand in awe of the "Amazing Grace" that saves "wretches" like me, and this empowers them for evangelical mission. Roman Catholics also look to Christ, suffering on the cross, as symbolized in the common use of the crucifix. In Catholic theology, suffering becomes a touch stone and common denominator for life and faith. It should come as no surprise that Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of the Christ" appealed especially to Evangelicals and Catholics- atonement Christians for whom the suffering and blood of the Passion dominate their conscious and unconscious faith systems. Episcopalians believe in the Atonement. But, it isn't our dominant theological core value.

Belief in the Holy Spirit represents the third great doctrine of Christianity. The Pentecost experience, as narrated in the Book of Acts, represents the defining moment of faith when individual believers are empowered for ministry, for the common good of the church. Pentecostal Christians claim to have had a strong personal experience in which they have received special, spiritual gifts. Charismatic Christians understand their faith to be authenticated in the manifestation of these spiritual gifts. All Christians, including Anglicans, give thanks for the gifts of the Spirit. We affirm that we are all gifted with a variety of gifts for the common good. But most Anglicans don't understand themselves as primary Pentecostal or Charismatic Christians.

Resurrection, Atonement, and Pentecostal Christians all claim some degree of exclusive grace. For Resurrection Christians, it is a matter of being personally transformed. For Atonement Christians, it is all about being saved. Pentecostal Christians place a huge emphasis on being gifted as an affirmation of God's power. In the process, almost all of the faith communities which think of themselves as primarily Resurrection, Atonement, or Pentecostal, set up boundaries and have a strong sense of who is 'in' and who is 'out'. Most of these Christian churches have defined membership requirements and most welcome people into their fellowship only after the new disciple has embraced the central tenets of the faith community. In other words, they believe that believing leads to belonging.

It is the fourth and last great doctrine of the Christian faith which has historically and practically most strongly appealed to Anglicans- belief in the Incarnation. In the creeds we confess that God became very man of the substance of the Virgin Mary; that God became man in Jesus Christ. This is an exceptional religious claim. Jesus wasn't just a prophet, an inspired teacher or even a good man. Jesus was God. Jesus is God. Jesus is not so much the Son of God, but rather, God the Son. As St. John begins the Fourth Gospel, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (literally, he pitched his tent among us!). For Anglicans, this is more than just a theological distinction or quant subtlety. And the ramifications of this thinking clearly inform our worship and social ethic. Simply put, we have a lively sense of Christ's Presence in our midst, in others, and especially in the brokenness of the world. Our dominate parable is the "Last Judgment", reminding us that when we visit the sick, fed the hungry, cloth the naked or visit the prisoner, we are doing this for Christ: "in as much as you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me".

Some believe that this preference for the theology of the Incarnation comes from our Celtic spiritual roots. The ancient Celtic peoples worshiped nature and were fascinated with the natural world. For them, the whole of creation was alive with the spirit world, with fairies and Little People. Each tree, spring, hill, lake, and valley had mystic meaning for each was alive with spiritual presence. Perhaps for this reason, the peoples of Ireland and other Celtic lands quickly embraced the missionary teaching of Patrick, Columba, Brendan and the great missionary saints. It was an easy transition; Christ was truly present in nature and in every moment and place: "Christ with me, within me, behind me, before me, besides me, beneath me, above me, in quiet, in danger, in the hearts of all that love me, in the mouth of friend and stranger" (H370).

Whether or not this ancient culture had such a defining impact we cannot clearly claim. But, it is certain that the great festival of the Incarnation, the Nativity of our Lord, has become the defining Anglican feast day. Christmas is our special day. Anglicans have contributed so many of the unique Christmas traditions now widely embraced in Christian culture and beyond. But it is important to remember that Christmas is not just about a cute baby, nor even about new birth. It is primarily a celebration of Emanuel, "God with us". Christmas is all about Incarnation. Perhaps for this reason, in many "high church" circles, the unique custom of bowing during the Creed at the words which

remember the Incarnation (“and was made man”) continues as a popular personal act of piety and remembrance.

The Incarnation represents the theological prism through which we view the world and live out our faith. Our worship exudes the vitality of celebrating the holy Presence of Christ, especially in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. There Christ is known to us in the breaking of the bread. Yet, the risen one also walks with us, as he once did with the disciples on the Day of Resurrection as they traveled to Emmaus. The risen one walks with us, instructs us, and bids us encounter him especially in the people on the margins. Our social ethic is not so much about doing good or even about justice. Rather, it is all about meeting and responding to Christ in one another. In our prayers and in much of our preaching of the Gospel, we return again and again to this core belief, God in our midst. Even when we proclaim the Resurrection, or reflect on the Atonement, or celebrate the Gifts of the Spirit, we tend to do so with Incarnational language and images of the Christ who walks among us.

Because we have this sense of the divine Presence in the world, we have a rather optimistic view of life. We tend to obscure or reject boundaries in the belief that Christ is in all things. We stand for inclusion, affirmation, and advocacy because we see Christ in all people. In mission we seek not so much to bring people to Christ as to meet Christ in people. This unbridled celebration of Christ’s Presence and optimistic view of life can have an unintended but significant consequence: we tend to downplay the doctrine of sin. The penitential tone and theology of former times has been dramatically reduced in our age. Whether this theological development is a byproduct of postmodernism or a reaction to heavy and dark psychological themes, we seem to be much less concerned about sin and the classical doctrine of salvation. Or is this development in fact, a natural extension of Incarnational belief?

As Episcopalians, we are many things, to be sure. But our bed rock of belief rests on a lively sense of Christ among us. We are Incarnational Christians. It is who we are. And when we gather for worship, or respond to contemporary moral issues, or proclaim the Good News, we do so out of this theological framework.