

Why Not Leave?

Every once in awhile, a commenter on one of the orthodox Anglican blogs will raise the question: "Why not just leave?" Sometimes they're asking, "Why not leave the Episcopal Church?" Often these are ECUSA revisionists who are irritated because they've won the battle, or at least they thought they had, yet we're not dead, we're not willing to admit we've been defeated, and we refuse to quit fighting. We're ruining their victory. My own bishop [Andrew Smith of Connecticut] raised just this question for over half of his most recent annual diocesan convention speech. The answer, of course, is simple. We intend to keep you up at night.

But sometimes the question is not "Why don't you leave the Episcopal Church?," but "Why don't you leave Anglicanism?" Those who ask are often former Episcopalians who have found relief in another church, often Roman Catholic or Orthodox, and they are asking us to join them.

These are people who left Anglicanism because they saw that the ECUSAn ship was sinking. Often they speak out of genuine concern. They now stand safely on the shore, and they are offering a hand, as they fear it is only a matter of time before we sink beneath the waves. I do appreciate their concerns, which, I believe, are genuine.

Others, however, have left Anglicanism, and look back with either the hurt of disappointed lovers, or the anger of those who seem to believe themselves betrayed, who have been sold a bill of goods. The message I too often hear from these people is that not only is the ship sinking, but it was never anything but a leaky tub anyway, and the damned thing deserved to sink. Sometimes I detect even a note of gleefulness that the useless hulk is going down, and those who stay aboard deserve their fate. But whether they're hurt, or angry, or gleeful, the message is the same. Anglicanism was a bad deal

from the start. But it's not too late to get aboard the real ship, the one ship that will never sink.

I understand the hurt and resentment, because I feel it myself. But not the dismissal. If I were ever to leave Anglicanism, it could only be with a sense of loss, that a noble vision of what it meant to be Christian had been tried for a few centuries, had produced some remarkable successes, and had brought much good to the world. Sadly, it had come to an end, and its loss would be much like that of those parts of the Byzantine Empire that were obliterated by Islam, or the Celtic Christians who faded after Augustine of Canterbury. For me, this would mean that the Church of Cranmer's liturgy, and Hooker's theology, and Donne's preaching, and Herbert's poetry, and Traherne's meditations, and Shakespeare's plays, and Butler's keen intellect, and Jane Austin's novels, and Wilberforce's and Gore's social vision, and Westcott's and Hort's and Hoskyn's biblical scholarship, and Arthur Michael Ramsey and Evelyn Underhill and . . . C.S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, Austin Farrer . . . This Church would be gone forever. But wasn't it a glorious thing while it lasted!

So why not leave? I can only give my own reasons.

So, first. Leave for what? Rome or Orthodoxy would be the obvious choices. At least they are the ones that are usually offered. When as a young man I left the Evangelical denomination in which I was raised, I became an Anglican because I believed that the Reformation was a reforming movement in the Western Catholic Church, and I was convinced that Anglicanism had come closest to getting that job done right. For the Roman Catholics, Vatican II was successful just to the extent that it incorporated many of the changes that had taken place at some time or another in Anglican history. Liturgy in the vernacular? Check. Communion in both kinds? Check. Renewed emphasis on Scripture? Check. In good critical translations? Check. Religious liberty? Check. Focus on

salvation by grace alone and reconsideration of justification by faith? Check. Married clergy? Well . . . Vatican II didn't do everything.

At the same time, one thing has not changed. As I have always understood it, one only has two choices about the Roman Catholic Church. One either must become a Roman Catholic, or one can not. There is no maybe about becoming Catholic. To become a Catholic, one is required to accept all of that Church's claims, including its claims about itself. If one accepts those claims, then one has no choice but to convert. But if one does not, one also has no choice. In that case, one cannot become Roman Catholic. And the Roman Catholic Church itself says that one cannot.

I am unable to bring myself to believe Rome's claims. Without going into details for now, as someone trained in theology (at a Catholic University, no less), I am convinced that the choices here are between Newman's understanding of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity and Barth's. And I think Barth was right, and Newman wrong.

Well, then? What about Orthodoxy? I want to claim the Greek Fathers for my own, of course—Athanasius, Cyril, the Cappadocians. I am even excited about learning from such lesser known lights as Leontius of Byzantium and Maximus the Confessor. And I recognize that the Eastern Church never accepted the authority of the bishop of Rome in the way in which Rome came to understand it. And I think they were right in that.

However, as with Rome, there are a number of things that Orthodoxy demands that I cannot quite bring myself to accept. Some are doctrinal niceties, for example, the somewhat abstruse distinction between the divine essence and energies. Or the doctrine of the *filioque*. I think the Western view is correct on both points. But at bottom, as I said above, I became Anglican because I believed Anglicanism was a reforming

movement in the Western Church, and I am a Western Christian.

Mine is the tradition of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, but also of Hooker, and Luther, and Barth. A Western Orthodoxy that was able to embrace and incorporate this Western tradition (including the Reformers) as well as its own would be an Orthodoxy that I would find attractive, perhaps irresistible. But, to the contrary, Orthodoxy often seems rather to be suspicious of this entire Western tradition, including Augustine, and all who followed him. And, of course, such a Western Orthodoxy would look a lot like . . . historical Anglicanism.

As for leaving Anglicanism for another Reformation Church . . . what would be the point? All of the mainline Protestant churches are struggling with the same issue as is Anglicanism. The Episcopal Church is just ahead of the parade. The non-sacramental free church Evangelicals alone have stood their ground, and I admire them tremendously. But I left that tradition for a reason.

Finally, there is another reason. And that is that I am not willing to make this decision as an individual. Many years ago, I left one denomination as an individual, and joined another. I do not regret that choice, but since making it, I am committed to those who have become my companions. I have discovered true companions along the Christian journey in the Episcopal Church, and I do not intend to desert them. You dance with the one that brought you.

So this choice I will not make as an individual. When the orthodox in North American Anglicanism make the choice that they eventually will make, I intend for that choice to be my choice.

I do believe that something providential is happening in the current crisis in the Western churches. The crisis certainly is not peculiar to the ECUSA/TEC. I studied at a Roman

Catholic seminary and took courses at a Methodist seminary before I became an Episcopalian. I did my doctoral work at a major Catholic University. Modernism had thoroughly infested all three places.

My own theory is that Modernism is divine judgment on Western Christendom for the ecumenical failures of the Reformation. Because both Rome and the Churches of the Reformation were unable to recognize the face of Christ in each other, including even Reformation churches who refused to recognize that face in each other, the divine judgment is that those churches are becoming ones in which the face of Christ is no longer able to be recognized at all.

But in that case, the last thing confessing Christians in all the churches need is once again to draw lines in the sand against one another, to refuse to recognize Christ's face in those who affirm the same Scriptures and confess the same Creeds. I can only regard the voices of those who ask me to leave Anglicanism for either Rome or Orthodoxy or some other Reformation Church as asking me to deny that the face of Christ can be seen in this Church.

I believe that a sorting out is taking place—that in fact a separation must and will take place between those in the Churches who continue to affirm historic Christian faith, and those who have exchanged Christ for the world's pottage. The struggle is against apostasy and heresy, and it is both. Those who offer the safety of Rome or Orthodoxy are right about that. But in that struggle, I think it important that those who continue to confess Christ in each Church in which the divine judgment strikes, stand firm and resist the apostasy together. We stand our ground, shoulder to shoulder, where Christ has placed us in the battle.

And, of course, one of the things that Anglicanism shares with both Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy is that, unlike many Reformation Churches, we do not stand alone, but are part of

an international Communion, a Communion that has held firm to the faith. The Episcopal Church is not Anglicanism, indeed is no longer Anglican at all. And worldwide Anglicanism, the Anglicanism of the Communion, has made it clear that it recognizes the orthodox in North America as the inheritors of Anglicanism, and has asked us to stand firm as it acts on our behalf.

The future looks messy, of course, even frightening. But also exciting. Divine judgment is taking place, but also, I think, a renewed orthodoxy that will rise from the ashes of the apostasy of the mainline churches.

Or to return to our earlier analogy. The ship is indeed sinking. But there are life boats. And the orthodox need to keep as many together in the boats as possible.

The renewed orthodoxy may well consist of Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians and Methodists, and free church Evangelicals—who meet in storefronts, or who share each others buildings. When we have nothing but Christ, we may well see Christ in each others faces again. And, then, at the far side of all of this, perhaps the remnant Reformation Churches and Rome and the Orthodox will see Christ's face in one another again.

Why would anyone want to leave at such a time?

An Advent Sermon



Of the three theological virtues—faith, hope and charity—hope is the virtue that most characterizes Advent. Faith is the virtue we might associate in particular with Easter. Faith believes that victory is hidden in the cross that awaits the end of the path of Holy Week; faith believes that God has triumphed over death by bringing the crucified Christ to new life, the resurrection life of Jesus we share in through faith; Charity, or love, we associate easily with Christmas; Christmas is the time when we give gifts to others in honor of the Great Gift God has given to us by sending his Son as a child in a manger; Christmas is the feast of the incarnation, the time when God is literally most human.

Hope, on the other hand, is the neglected middle child of the virtues, neither the heroic virtue of faith that overcomes all doubts, nor the easily sentimentalized virtue of love about which songs are sung that make us feel all warm inside. In the words of John Lennon's Beatles tune: "All you need is love. Love is all you really need." So also, Advent is that season with which we often don't quite know what to do. Advent is sort of latched onto Christmas by default. Advent is the season of Hope because it is the season of anticipation. During Advent, we anticipate the season of Christmas in which God comes among us as the infant in Mary's arms. But let's face it. Advent wreaths are nice; they can't compare to Christmas trees.

Then again, there is another side to Advent, that side of Advent that looks not toward the birth of Jesus—an anticipation that is really a remembering, a looking back to a time in the past—but that side that looks forward to the return of Jesus. This is one of those articles in the Creed

that perhaps makes us just a little bit uncomfortable. We associate awaiting the second coming of Christ with quaint nineteenth-century people who calculated detailed dates of Jesus' return, who dressed in white robes and waited on roof tops, only to have to go home disappointed the next morning. Perhaps you've heard of William Miller, the Baptist preacher from Vermont who preached for twenty-five years that Jesus would return in March 1843, then March 1844, then October 22, 1844. There were a lot of disappointed people on October 23, 1844.

We fear that hope too easily verges on fanaticism, so we bide our time to wait and see. We may not be jaded cynics, but we're not throwing caution to the winds, either. A little hope is okay, perhaps hope for the immediate future. Let's hope that the Republicans can get enough votes next time to take back the Congress, or that the Democrats can solidify enough support so they can keep it. Cosmic hope, hope that everything will someday turn out—that may be more than we're ready for.

In some ways, we are perhaps much like the nation of Israel in its infancy. In the early days of the nation of Israel, hope was directed toward the immediate future. When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, they seem to have had one immediate hope, deliverance from the bondage of Egypt. After God delivered Israel from bondage, the hope was that God would lead his people to the Promised Land, and make them secure in the land. Once they were in the land, however, Israel's threats did not disappear; the nation continued to have threats from without and within. From without, Israel's neighbors threatened constantly to overrun and conquer the nation. From within, there was always the danger of abandoning the distinct nature of Israel's faith and of assimilating to the practices of the surrounding peoples. And, of course, Israel faced the same kind of domestic problems we face today. The strong and wealthy took advantage of the weak and poor; Israel was ruled by a series of kings, who were sometimes good

but often only made things worse.

As Israel's all-too-ordinary leaders continued to shatter the hopes of the people, an interesting thing happened. The hope that was originally grounded in ordinary political rulers, kings like David or his descendants, did not fade; instead it began to expand to become a hope about an unheard of kind of Davidic ruler, a political solution to the problem of inadequate political rulers that transcends politics. No ordinary king could do what the king described in this morning's readings from Isaiah 11 and Psalm 72 does. In time, Israel came to realize that nothing short of a complete remaking of the universe would do to satisfy shattered hopes; when hope is satisfied, the lion will lie down with the lamb, the child will play over the den of the poisonous asp and will not be hurt. The righteous descendant of David will be no longer a merely ordinary king, but an emissary who rules on behalf of God in an earthly paradise. Only the Creator could bring about such a reversal of the way things are.

Hope is oriented toward the future, and at the heart of Jesus' message were words about hope that pointed toward that future. The promise of the coming King who would be like David, but who was much more than David could ever have been, was implied in Jesus' proclamation that "The kingdom of God is at hand!" The words of the Beatitudes are so familiar to us that we may not notice that they point toward this future hope: the poor are blessed because theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven, but they are not blessed yet; those who mourn are blessed because they will be comforted; the meek are blessed because they will inherit the earth; those who hunger for righteousness will be filled; the merciful will receive mercy; the pure in heart will see God. Neither Jesus nor his followers saw these things happening right then and there, any more than we see them happening today. Nonetheless, Jesus was not merely preaching pie in the sky by and by. Though Jesus looked forward to the future coming of God's kingdom, as did other Jews of his time,

he also believed something radically different about this future; Jesus believed that in some way glimpses of this future kingdom of fulfilled hopes and reversed values were already present, already being anticipated in his own deeds and words. So he acted as if the poor and the meek were already blessed, he healed the sick, and he brought God's mercy to the sinners with whom he ate and drank, even as the future Davidic King was supposed to do.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the New Testament Church saw in him the righteous King like David who would fulfill Isaiah's prophecy. Insofar as it did so, it has left us with a profound ambiguity. It was certainly not evident to those who put Jesus to death that he was the fulfillment of Israel's dreams. The charge that was placed against him, that was nailed to his cross, was that he was the King of the Jews. But those who placed it there did so out of a sense of mockery. That the Church has continued to believe that the charge was in fact correct, that Jesus was and is and will be the King of the Jews, the righteous descendant of David, was founded on the belief that Jesus had overcome death. That death still seems to reign so often is a continual challenge to the assertion that Jesus is King; that Jesus is King is the church's affirmation that death will not have the last word. The Church has continued to exist only because it believes that Jesus' Kingship will not always be hidden, because it believes he will return and set all things right. Jesus offers present hope only because in the end he offers cosmic hope.

Christian hope is then an ambivalent virtue. Hope is not an immediate product of our experience; rather, hope contradicts what our experience now tells us. We don't now see the poor lifted up, the mournful comforted, or the meek in charge of the earth. Hope only operates when we are denied for the present that for which we long and dream. As long as we have what we want, and life is well, we can afford to be indifferent about the future. If we hope about the future, we

hope it will be much like today. It is only when the present is a threat that we think about a better future. We find, then, that we must choose between hope and despair. Hope is grounded in the assurance that eventually we will obtain what we lack now; despair is grounded in the fear that we will not.

Christian hope is not only ambivalent, it is not utopian. What do I mean by that? Hope is not simply a fulfillment of our this-worldly dreams. The future we hope for is not something conjured up or ushered in by human effort. There is a kind of political Christianity that equates Christian hope with the changing of political structures. The religious right and the so-called "politically correct" left do not differ radically in this regard. Of course, both are motivated by different images of the future. The religious right's image is motivated largely by fear and by judgment of those they perceive to be their own and therefore God's enemies. But their goal for society is frankly this-worldly. They want to return America to the way it was in the 1950's. The left has a very different kind of vision of the future, but their goal is also this-worldly. The goals of the left would be entirely achieved if only society could be completely restructured so that the oppressed were no longer oppressed. And the left's identifications of the oppressed are defined by the peculiarly class and social values of a particular affluent Western elite. Marx, I think, would not recognize the current left as embodying his social ideals. The problem with the hopes of both the left and the right is that they are not radical enough; that which they hope for cannot be achieved by political means.

Christian hope presupposes the fulfilling of a grander scheme than the restructuring of mere political realities. This is what Israel slowly realized when it began dreaming of a King who would rule over a world in which all things were made right. Christian hope presupposes the remaking of the entire universe. A hope that is not cosmic cannot provide the kind of

final satisfaction toward which hope pushes. Even if it were possible that our goals and dreams for ourselves and for society might someday be fulfilled, at the end of the road there would still be death, and death puts an end to all dreams and hopes. We cannot have hope for even our everyday dreams without the cosmic hope that eventually all is not futile, and that all will be well. When a mother tells her crying child that everything will be all right, she is offering the assurance of nothing less than a cosmic hope.

Nonetheless, cosmic hope does not mean fleeing from the world, giving up on the way things are. Rather, it is our hope for the future that leads to our dissatisfaction with the way things are now. It is only hope for an ultimate future that enables us to carry on from day to day, to try to make things different, if only in small ways. Though our plans and schemes for a better future for ourselves and for those we love are at most provisional, they are symptoms of that ultimate yearning without which we cannot live. Our bottomless wants are signs of a hunger that is not yet satisfied.

While cosmic hope is oriented toward the future of "someday," it is still grounded in the concrete reality of that which has happened in the past. Christian hope is grounded in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Our hope is in the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Because God is faithful to Jesus, we can trust him to be faithful to us. So we find that the hope of Advent is linked to the faith of Easter and the Charity of Christmas. Without hope, there can be no faith that the God who gave life to Jesus will be true to his promises and give life to us. Without faith, we cannot hope that those promises will be fulfilled. In hope, we trust one day to experience in full the love we glimpse in the manger of Bethlehem. Because in some way we have come to know this love made incarnate among us, we can hope that it will not be merely a pipedream.

Finally, just as Christian hope is grounded in the concrete

events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, so it finds its expression in concrete ways, whenever we wish and dream that things were different, wherever we work at even the smallest day-to-day tasks, and not least in the concrete reality of Christian communities where we worship the God of hope each Sunday morning. The local church is the community that lives out its life in anticipation of that future that God has planned for all the human race. Hope gives us the courage to trust in the God who meets us in a crucified and yet risen King. May we experience for ourselves the reality of St. Paul's blessing in this morning's epistle: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Rom. 15:13). Amen.