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A LAMBETH REFLECTION FROM BISHOP JOHN AUGUST 2008

'It is well that we are here'

My Dear Friends,

The Gospels record that, on the Mount of the Transfiguration, the apostle Peter was so captivated and overwhelmed by what he had experienced that he wanted to remain there to live, as it were, that moment for ever. However, the Gospels go on to record that Peter's wish, profoundly expressive of a human desire to remain in a place of bliss, was not granted and that, in the company of Jesus, Peter, James and John journeyed back down the mountain to continue the pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

In the months and weeks following my election, consecration and enthronement, the fact that, by way of the Lambeth Conference of Bishops, the Anglican Communion was to deprive me of two and a half weeks of July and early August became something of a cloud on the horizon. Some of you will in fact have heard me say that I was not particularly looking forward to it. My apprehension was based on a number of factors, for example:

- Being away from home and family for such a period
- Having to miss important events and opportunities in the Diocese and beyond
- Fearing the fact that there were a number of profound challenges or difficulties on the agenda of the Communion which threatened to either disrupt or fracture the family life of the Communion.

More selfishly I worried about two and a half weeks in a student hall of residence, eating institutional food and spending virtually all day of every day in study, discussion or other groups.

The compensations of being in Canterbury, having the opportunity to draw on and be strengthened by the threads of faith which weave themselves around the

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place and to engage face to face with bishops from all over the world seemed to be poor compensation!

When I arrived, the cloud of gloom hanging over me as it invariably did over A. A. Milne's Eeyore grew darker as I found my room and inspected the facilities. The prospect of spending two and a half weeks there began to feel like a life sentence. I scarcely felt like exclaiming 'It is good that we are here'. I ached to get back down the mountain and get back to home and normality as soon as possible.

But then, the scene slowly and positively began to change. Another room, a much better one, was allocated. The Archbishop of Canterbury's Bible Studies began to tease out something of the truth about why we were gathered, and the rich variety of worship began to unfold, in ways which words could not, the cosmopolitan yet loving foundation which makes the Anglican Communion the rare creature which it is and which, I pray, it will continue to be. Transfiguration was beginning to occur, and I was beginning to feel that it was good that we were there after all.

However, lest you should feel that I am about to say that I got a warm, cosy and unreal sense of all being well, allow me at once, to disabuse you. That was not so. It was far from so. It was quite evident that there were divisions, sharp divisions. And these began to emerge immediately in the daily Bible Study Groups made up of eight Bishops from different parts of the Communion. (My particular group, Ambrose, - they were all named after Saints - included, apart from myself bishops from England, South Africa, Tanzania, the United States, Australia and Canada.) We represented cultures and traditions (ecclesiastical and national) that could not have been more varied, and we each held opinions on faith, ethics, biblical interpretation and other matters that reflected the whole range of opinion to be found within our Communion. I had been a bishop for just three months; one had been a Bishop for only two weeks; another had been a Bishop for almost twenty five years and was attending his third Lambeth; between these extremes of experience lay a wide range of lengths of service. Interestingly, however, all of us had been Parish Priests, and all of us had, therefore, significant experience of dealing with people of all ages and all conditions in their daily lives

As we studied the 'I AM' sayings of Jesus found *par excellence* in the Gospel according to St John, we were enabled by the questions prepared for us and by skilful and prayerful leadership to bring to bear upon our divisions of opinion and interpretations the penetrating light, the living water and the nourishing bread of Jesus himself - he who is, for Christians, I AM, God with us. The sheep began to hear the voice of the shepherd. We came to recognise that, however differently we might interpret certain features of our common life and the words by which we are called to live that life, it was and is and always should be by asking the question 'How would Jesus deal with this situation?' that we could make real progress as a church and as a communion and be enabled to present to the world a pattern for life that would have profound meaning for all.

Furthermore, the common denominator of dealing with real people with real problems and real challenges enabled us to share very honestly the pain and

strain of confronting situations which were difficult, perplexing and sometimes virtually impossible to resolve. We were reminded of the words from *Luke 18: 27*, 'What is impossible with men is possible with God'. Archbishop Rowan, in his final retreat address on the day before the conference proper, had urged us to hold on to the words from *Hebrews 12: 1 & 2*, '...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith ...'. Situations of challenges that we might think of as impossible could be transformed if we bring to bear upon them the mind of Christ.

None of this meant that there were easy answers, nor did it mean that everything was resolved so that we would all live happily ever after. In this world such endings exist only in fairy-tales and could only occur among ordinary people were they to become perfect which, of course, none of us can. We are, however, obliged to try and try and try. It did mean, however, that we were forced to admit that Jesus's way of dealing with people was often radically different from our way. Jesus interpreted times and life, rules and laws, so that they set people free from burdens which they could not or should not carry and enabled them to begin to understand the 'glorious liberty of the children of God' (*Romans 8:21*).

Learning the decisive lesson and virtue of being willing to interpret is not always easy nor is it always conducive to certainty. There are those who prize certainties above all else: certainty in sacramental theology; certainty in ritual correctness; certainty in biblical interpretation; certainty in ethical practice, to name but a few. Such certainties might be desirable and, in some circumstances, very welcome. The certain answer may be convenient to give but it has within it the germ of something which was alien to the heart of the Jesus to whom I have given my loyalty and whom I seek both to follow and present to others. That 'something' is exclusion. The way of Jesus is, according to Matthew found by the narrow gate (*Matthew 7: 13*) which is not the gate of exclusion. The way, I believe, is found by entering through the narrow gate of a disciplined, thoughtful search for the mind of Christ. It is the narrow gate in the sense that it may be the hard gate. But, as he reminds us in *John 10:9*, Jesus himself is the gate, and therefore any opinions which we express or any decisions which we reach are to be those which we have tried and persevered to express and reach by bringing to bear his mind upon the circumstances which demand them.

Jesus did not proclaim that he had come that **some** might have life – this group or that group – he came that **all** might have life, life in all its fullness. He came to draw **all** people to himself. He came that there might be one flock, one shepherd. He did not come to exclude but to welcome. His choice of friends, disciples and company, often from among the excluded, made this very clear.

Equally he did proclaim, as Archbishop Rowan succinctly put it, that 'All are welcome does not mean anything goes.' He came to demand that we should employ our God-given gifts, above all that most excellent gift of love, in ensuring that there is brought to bear the love of God upon all our dealings, all our decision making, all our deliberations and all our contacts with others. They, like us, are frail and flawed individuals, but nevertheless individuals upon whom, like Peter in *Luke 21: 61*, the gaze of Jesus rests when we fall short. I do not believe that, when he looked at Peter, Jesus was saying 'I told you so.' I do not believe that he was

condemning him. There may have been a judgement, but it was a judgement of love which spoke of understanding rather than exclusion. Jesus was teaching Peter the truth about himself, a truth which we must all learn about ourselves, namely that, despite our promises, our declarations of loyalty and our deep, deep desire to be like Jesus, we can only succeed in bits and pieces and from time to time.

So, when we come to handling scripture, when we come face to face with styles of worship that are unusual, when we come to dealing with those with whom we disagree, when we come to deciding whether we can live alongside and welcome people whose lifestyles, sexuality or opinions we find challenging, we ought to guard against approaching these things from the perspective of having the certain answer.

The French philosopher Voltaire is recorded as having said, ' I disapprove of what you say but will defend to the death your right to say it'. As disapproval does not require condemnation so disagreement does not require exclusion.

Now let me confirm what you have already realised: I have not mentioned specifically either the matter of human sexuality or the matter of women bishops. Both of these figured in significant discussion among the Bishops and at the Spouses Conference. Having said that, the nonsense written in some press reports which presented Lambeth 2008 as a place of civil war and open hostility was a grotesque caricature. It is true that over 200 Bishops did not attend because of their opinions of others and of their views. Whilst accepting the right of any or all of them to decline the Archbishop's invitation to the Conference, their absence was something which we regretted as it created a missed opportunity for Christian consultation and godly conversation. It is true that I was personally wary of some actually present because of what I had read about them and heard about them second or third hand. But what I found was what I believe the absentees would have found, namely that caricatures are, at best, laughable and, at worst, deeply ungodly. When properly discerned they are found to be wanting in truth and are both figments of imagination and distortions of truth. Like Voltaire, I disapprove of the utterances of some, but I wholly respect their right to utter.

So, what was the truth of where those present found themselves? Although I recognise that there exist genuinely held differences of opinion, I believe that all were arrived at through the narrow gate as described above, the seeking of the mind of Christ. Further, virtually everybody with whom I conversed or who spoke in the discussion groups and open plenaries still felt themselves to be part of the flock under the one shepherd and longed to remain so. In general, opinions and views were considered to have been legitimately arrived at through the synodical processes of different provinces, considered as such even by those who differed. It would be manifestly untrue to say that there were not many who felt that the policies and actions of others were unacceptable and had been damaging. (It is also untrue to say that those responsible for such policies and actions were wholly unrepentant.) But even those who felt that way generally respected the legitimacy of the process by which such policies and actions had been arrived at.

It is in this respecting of legitimacy that there lies, I believe, a key to our Communion's future. If those who were outside Lambeth 2008 and those who were

within (and they by no means cancel each other out – some GAFCON bishops and some whose primates had forbidden them to attend were still there) accept that others, having gone through the narrow gate of recognised processes of interpretation and of searching for the mind of Christ, can legitimately hold opinions different from their own, there is more than a glimmer of hope. In other words, I might disapprove of your conclusion; I might find it challenging to understand you or even to like you; but I accept the legitimacy of the process which has brought you to where you are, and I must, therefore, accept that it is legitimate for you to hold a particular view or interpretation even if, after following my own processes of discernment, I reach a different conclusion. Thus, in Christian love, I accept you, as Jesus does, as a child of God upon whom he looks in love and understanding. I must try to journey with you and you with me, as Jesus would with us both.

So, to conclude. Despite early apprehensions, it was well that we were there – very well. It would have been better had all been there and had none been missing, but nevertheless we treasure that which we learned and that which we simply could not fail to absorb from the openness and Christian witness of others. Many have been transfigured, if not completely, in part certainly by the strengthening of common bonds and by a desire to understand others more fully. Like Peter, James and John we are obliged to descend from the mountain, but also like them we do so with Jesus whose mind we must continue openly and honestly to seek.

Please continue to pray for the Communion and for those of us who share the office of Bishop. We seek to serve each one of you in the name of the Lord Jesus and to affirm, in his love, the legitimate place of all who love him, in our cosmopolitan, colourful if sometimes aggravating Anglican family.

I will be more than happy to share discussions with anyone about what is said above or about my perceptions of our situation. We may lovingly disagree about conclusions but we must never allow this to destroy or disable the heritage in which we share and which, despite our differences, others recognise as a gift.

+ John Swansea & Brecon