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Ecclesiology.

What is your idea of the Church, the young and earnest Christian Mr Gladstone once asked a man on the top of a horse drawn bus. The reply was a "large building with an organ in it."

You have asked me to talk about ecclesiology as a contribution to your reflections in these three days together and it would be possible to approach this subject by analysing some classic surveys – perhaps even exhuming significant Anglican contributions like Richard Field's great work on The Church. There is a place for such studies but in your company I do not want to act as a scribe but confess to my own default images of the church and to describe in a rather personal way the aspects of the ecclesiological tradition and contemporary experience of the Church which really have energising resonance for me.

I do this because I know how unclear for many people, is their sense of what the church is for. I remember asking the first couple I married as a parish priest in this Diocese what they thought the church was for. They found the question very hard and could only come up with the idea that it was for looking after the old folk. We also have to face the fact that for others the whole idea of the Church is such a turn off that they are spiritual in an ABC way – Anything but the Church.

As usual to recapture freshness we must return to the sources. The word ecclesia in the New Testament draws its

meaning from both Old Testament usage and contemporary Hellenistic experience. Ecclesia in the LXX translates the word for the whole assembly of Israel. In the Hellenistic City State, the ecclesia was the whole free citizen body summoned by authority to deliberate together or to perform public liturgies like building a road or a temple.

Christians could have organised themselves as an association for promoting the memory and the study of the teachings of Jesus. There were a myriad of such associations in the Roman Empire. What caused Christians to be persecuted was that they claimed to be a new social organism, a New Israel, springing from the work of Jesus in calling the Twelve, with a citizen body which scandalously included from the beginning slaves and women and even children, persons who had no place in the traditional ecclesia. The authorities saw this as subversive of social order.

Christians tried of course to live peaceably in the structures of the Empire but they could not deny that the church was in truth an eschatological essay, an anticipation of the end time not only in the teaching which was given but in its very structure.

The liturgy was the public work which expressed and developed the ecclesia. The citizens left their nets to enter into the story of Jesus and to hear and obey his new commandment to love irrespective of blood ties or class solidarity. They were called by the word of God, to recognise and repent of everything in their lives that was turned in upon the self and divorced from the love and God and neighbour which liberates the true and deepest self.

They entered the liturgy with all that fed their lives and held these things up in the light of God so that they were disclosed as gifts of divine love. So masters of the earth were converted into guests by the alchemy of the Christian liturgy.

In this way the new society was constituted and travelled together into the dimension of the Kingdom. The orientation was next worldly, rather than other worldly and still less was it this worldly.

The re-membering that Jesus commanded us to undertake was more profound than simply remembering past events, like last year's holiday in Frinton. It was re-membering as distinct from dis-membering which is the fruit of sin. We are called to nothing less than a re-membering of Christ's body on earth having understood that it is the Father's hidden purpose that everything in heaven and earth should find their head and centre in the Word made flesh. In this way we are called into a participation in what the ancient writers call the round dance of the Trinity, the perichoresis.

God forgive me I remember being asked by someone early on in my ministry whether I would be prepared to die for the truth of the Holy Trinity. I replied that I thought that the question was rather theoretical. I do not think so now. The Church is an essay in Trinitarian living. We worship a God who has revealed himself not as a solitary monad whose will must be obeyed with submission but as a dynamic social reality in whom relatedness is not an add-on but of the essence. The intoxicating words of the creed ascribed to Athanasius put the matter with marvellous balance we

worship the Trinity, neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.

Last week I went to share the memories of some veterans of the Normandy landings. They were confronting a vision of human society dominated by technological images of machine like efficiency which involved the eradication of the unfit and the submission of all to a single will. Ultimately it was a system based on false theology.

More recently we have been exposed to another extreme view that all rights and meaning in life can be located in the autonomous individual and that there is no such thing as society. Ironically of course if you privilege the individual and discount all those partnerships, families and associations which teach us to relate as persons then there is a corresponding and necessary huge expansion in the surveillance and intrusion of the state apparatus in an effort to prevent collision between the individual billiard balls.

The Trinitarian faith which should be embodied in the Church, in its teaching and structure is that we are persons, unique and precious but persons in communion. There is a role for all and no one is replaceable but as persons we grow to our full stature according to the teaching and example of Christ but putting the centre of our attention and service outside ourselves in God and in God as we see the Spirit of Jesus in one another. That is why the ancient writers said that we are saved in our neighbour. We fall alone but we are saved together.

The Church is healthful organism, to the extent to which it grows from Trinitarian faith.

I have much more to say about these foundational matters but you cannot bear them now. In my second of three sections I want briefly to touch on what we say about ourselves as a Church of England.

In the declaration which is a carefully crafted statement of the identity of the church which everyone in this room has affirmed on sundry occasions we begin by saying that the Church of England is part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. This one church existed in the prayer and command of Jesus to his friends, to whom at the Last Super he entrusted his future in the world. Very soon this original unity was fractured by failures of communication and pride. So the one church was and is both the aspiration and intention of Jesus and the goal to which we are working. To this extent the structure of every part of the fragmented church is provisional.

The Church was intended to be a school of profound and peaceful relating in the Spirit of the Holy Trinity. As I have said, in the communion, all sorts and conditions are invited to come together without distinction of race or status, to give thanks for life and to be re-membered, as members of a new body, which does not obliterate our precious individuality as persons but which develops our full spiritual beauty in relationship with God and with other persons. The constant repetition of the mass, throughout the history of Europe, built a new kind of social cohesion and helped to lay down the social capital which is eroding so rapidly in our own time.

The Christian faith not only knitted people together in a new way but also put flesh and blood on the idea of the common good, in a universal context, which transcended private interest and tribal loyalty. As such the Church was a powerful agent of unity and peace as Europe emerged from the traumas of the barbarian overthrow of the Roman Empire.

These are the enduring themes – the knitting together of what begins by being broken and fragmentary and the universalising of communion – bonding and bridging.

The Church of the high Middle Ages, the Church of the builder of old St Paul's Bishop Maurice was confident and expansive but the traumas of plague and the pressure of the Turkish advance intensified after 1453 and produced greater rigidity and dogmatism in the church.

The old Western Church was full of diversity, radical friars disputing with tenured monks; episcopal jurisdictions riddled with exemptions and peculiars like some great Gruyere cheese; illuminated nuns; a disputatious theological culture with many issues open to sometimes ferocious debate but withal the relentless advance of ecclesiastical bureaucracy and an increasingly complex legal structure which had its apex in Rome.

Professor Dairmaid MacCulloch in his excellent new book on the Reformation Era points out that in 1500 there were no Roman Catholics in Europe with the exception of the Kingdom of Bohemia. There a reform

movement led by Jan Huss had resulted in the establishment of the Utraquist Church, so called because lay people could receive both the bread and the wine in communion. There were Roman Catholic Churches in Bohemia consciously loyal to the Pope but elsewhere and in London nearly everyone was a member of the Western Catholic Church in which of course the Bishop of Rome had a pivotal position.

The 16th century saw this old church fragment and the debris being recast in the form of the churches we know today. Every church was affected and in many ways the Church of Rome was more effectively reformed than the Church of England in the sessions of the long running Council of Trent. Certainly Rome was a more successful missionary church as a result of the Counter Reformation.

But the Church which had knit the people together in a communion which transcended local loyalties and opened the new community to universal values became itself the nursing mother of conflict. London was just one of the battle grounds in a European civil war which resulted in the devastation of much of the continent before the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 brought most of the fighting to an end.

The spiritual damage was lasting and haunts us still. The West European Enlightenment emerged out of disgust at what religious fanaticism had done. It is no co-incidence that during the decade which saw the conclusion of the Thirty Years War and the English Civil War, Galileo published his “Dialogue Concerning Two New Sciences, Descartes his “Principles of

Philosophy" while Newton was born. "The fragmentation brought about by warring Christian absolutisms argued the need for another type of belief system, more rationally persuasive and less controversially subjective."

The period which saw Europe divided yielded fruit as well as bitterness. Much good flowed from putting the vernacular scriptures in the hands of the laity but we are still recovering from some of the malign developments of the period. Church life was over bureaucratised; mystery was over-defined; and organisation and doctrinal rigidity was used in a polemical interest to war with other sects often in unholy alliance with states and dynasties anxious to consolidate their lands against competitors. This forms an agenda for repentance and change if we are once again to resemble the church described by St Augustine. "In certis unitas, in dubiis libertas et in omnibus caritas".

But with the convulsions of the past century we have become more aware that the old Western Church was itself the fruit of the disintegration of the Christian vision. Our work for Christ's Church cannot be pursued in isolation from the Eastern Christian tradition. It is arguable that the charismatic movement of recent times is a response to the eclipse of the Holy Spirit which is obvious from the liturgical developments of the later Middle Ages in the West. The Consecration prayer of the BCP which does not include any kind of epiclesis was not the result of Reformation thinking but simply shared in the general Western unease about the work of the Holy Spirit.

My third section is a glance at some particular challenges we face as a Church now in London.

It is refreshing to spend some time away in other times and cultures in order to return to a clearer understanding of the contribution we are called to make in our own time. Such reflection can also deepen our sense that we have freedom for manoeuvre and important choices to make.

I have been thinking abut the Church in the 7th century. As the Church sought to serve the East Saxon tribe in the 7th century, there were many new things for the natives to absorb.

There was new teaching and not least a brighter prospect beyond the grave which contrasted with the melancholy speculations of the pagan cults. I find fascinating parallels in the ebbing of hope in our own time.

There was a religion of the Book which re-established contact with the literary culture of the old prestigious Roman world in its surviving West European outposts in Gaul and Italy.

There was a new style of worship. The mass built bridges between God and humanity but also between members of different tribes. Chanting, the spread of which is especially noticed by the historian the Venerable Bede, was itself a powerful means of helping people to listen to one another and relate more harmoniously.

There was a new organisation, dependent at first on the good will of tribal rulers but as the church grew, especially in London during the episcopate of St Erkenwald at the end of the 7th century, it developed as a social institution influential in its own right and soon indispensable in the administration of the English kingdoms.

England was not as yet divided into parishes of course. The term parochia in the 7th century seems to have meant a regional sphere of spiritual authority – most commonly that of the bishop. The bishop in fact in the London of 604 was in himself the Church in embryo. Boundaries were only roughly drawn and in the first part of the 7th century, Bishops were mostly peripatetic. It is only with Erkenwald consecrated by the Greek monk Theodore from Paul's home city of Tarsus, that London received a properly resident bishop.

The work of evangelisation was undertaken by minister communities, like the ones founded by Erkenwald himself, at Chertsey and Barking where his sister Ethelburga was abbess. You should imagine these minsters scattered throughout Essex and Middlesex and perhaps South East Hertfordshire, small stockaded communities with a simple church served by monks and nuns who spent much of their time in agriculture.
This, then, was how the story began in London as the Latin mission adapted itself to the needs of the East Saxon tribe and sought to reclaim the territory lost when the legions departed.

What of now? Many of those areas of missionary work undertaken by the 7th century deserve re-examination but we still have to resolve questions relating to the territorial organisation of the church and its establishment in law in mediaeval England. We must also revisit questions of the limits on diversity if our pluralism of style is not to become in the words of cardinal Cassidy at the last Lambeth Conference, a species of post modern beatitude.

It seems to me that we must insist once again on the need to repent of the over-definition of mystery which was such an unhappy development in the 16th century. I believe that the Preface to the Declaration of Assent is right to identity the basis for our unity in the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the Catholic Creeds. We ought not to elevate second order issues or dubious deductions into the status of touchstones of orthodoxy. The invitation of the Church of England has always been not "here are some theological propositions – please sign here" but "here is a book of worship, a mosaic of scripture and tested divinity, will you worship with us in this way?"

Historically the local church in the Church of England has been principally located in the Diocese while permitting the widest possible freedom for its component parts notably the parish. Now in the very mobile and diverse society which we serve in London, the importance of our membership of a local church wider than that of individual parishes has once again come into focus if we are to have the capacity of serving London in its structures, sectors and networks as well as in its residential areas. It is together that we fulfil the invitation of the Trinitarian God and together that we can serve more effectively the complex reality of modern

London in which knowledge of the Christian story and attachment to the church on the corner has vanished for many people within the last generation.

Unity is not just a contribution to efficiency but related to the essential character of the Church as I have tried to express. The unity is of course that of the whole people of God. We have to transcend the rather recent lurch into clericalism which is not typical of the Anglican tradition as a whole but it is doubtful whether the primary instrument of this unity will continue to be synodical in the form in which it was developed in the palmy days of the fifties, in a world more remote in some ways to my mind than that of the 7th century. Many of the most dynamic individuals and communities have effectively seceded from synods though not from the reality of the Church.

One thing is clear that proper authorisation of who may preach and who may celebrate the sacrament of the New Covenant will continue to be essential to the unity of the Church in a period of experiment and the kind of change which we must embrace to stay faithful to the eternal gospel. Your unity with one another and your unity around the Bishop, a unity which depends on prayer and proper trust, is an essential condition for the church to flourish and grow in a healthy way. I thank God for the partnership in the gospel which we do enjoy and pray for an even deeper reality.

Lastly as you look forward to these precious days together, you will be thinking of the marks of a ministry which is truly expressive of the Trinitarian character of the Church. So much is a matter of balance and as I was thinking about our meeting a potential mnemonic came into my mind.

Matrix.
M – missionary. Just like Mellitus we are called to go into all the world to meet Jesus Christ and to be a missionary. M is not in my book a manager but it is undeniable that the Church at every level will have to manage its affairs more efficiently and professionally in order to preserve its reputation. There is huge agenda for change here which involves liberation for ministers of the gospel and challenge for those who are tempted to retreat to their computer screens in face of the seemingly impermeable territory in which many of us work. Incidentally I am convinced that the stipend in London is not sufficient to set people especially families free from anxiety and in the next stage of our financial planning together I shall be seeking to persuade partners that we need to enhance clergy stipends.

A – assembler. A missionary works from and seeks to incorporate new disciples in the Christian Assembly and A is for Assembling by preaching and presiding at those points at which the aggregation is converted into a congregation, baptism and the eucharist.

T – teacher. We are all called not so much to give voice to our private musings but to be communicators in a fresh way that uses our varied experiences and gifts of the apostolic teaching. This responsibility of course assumes that we are keeping ourselves fresh by appropriate study and not giving in to feelings of guilt when we read a book or go to a play or watch Casualty – which I remember was Bishop Brian's preferred form of in-service training.

R – regulator. Communities thrive with the right balance between form and freedom. There is a place for discipline in the church, restraining the French Horns and encouraging the triangles to contribute to the symphony we make together.

I – intercessor. There is no sustained growth in spiritual depth, there is no true unity without the healthful dispositions which can only grow with prayer.

X – single crosser. We are together those who have a conscious care and responsibility for the link between the local and universal. That is why I have set my face against the term local ordained ministry. It is good that ministers can reflect and represent local cultures but we are all ordained in the Church of God and something essential is lost if we give into the idea of a merely local ministry. X might also stand for xeno-philia – love of the stranger.