Catholic Mission

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Catholic Anglicans have always drawn inspiration from the undivided church – the church Catholic when such a word referred (most of the time) to an obvious existing body. I would like to suggest today that a return to the undivided church might be helpful for Catholic Anglicans at the present time, from a new perspective. The teachings of the early fathers of the church have been a primary theological resource for Catholic Anglicans, especially those who have wished to define their Catholicity as something different from the Roman Catholicism. There is that sense of connection with a church which is so clearly sacramentally focused, which became the type and pattern for the restoration work of the liturgical movement of the twentieth century. All of those remain significant for Anglican Catholic identity, but I'd like to bring out today a more pragmatic connection between our situation and theirs. In the light of the theological connection we feel with the early church, it may be that we can also learn something of significance about their response to the social situation in which they found themselves.

It has become commonplace to point out that the church in this country is now living in a post-Christendom situation. The story of Christianity is no longer in the ether; people feel no need to describe themselves as Christian, let alone 'CofE'; religion is one lifestyle choice for those who like that sort of thing, but certainly not a public narrative that need command respect, let alone belief. And that means that the church, if it is to continue to exist, it has to learn to be explicit about what has up to now often remained implicit. I heard someone recently describing the Anglican approach to mission as 'doing good, and hoping people will guess why'. Well, the first part's fine, but we cannot rely on the second, if we ever could. The church which is unable to give an account of the reason for its existence is unlikely to exist for too much longer; people who are seeking for meaning in their life will not automatically think of the church as the place to find it. Our mission will have to change, because the context we are in has already changed.

We are in a completely different situation from the one the church has enjoyed – well, since when? One suggestion is St. Augustine's arrival in 597, but I think that's a bit early – I prefer to go for Theodore of Tarsus, eighth archbishop of Canterbury, who laid the foundations of the parish system in the late seventh century. In that case, we have approximately 1350 years of history to re-think in order to work out what it means to be the church in our own time and place.

Because Catholic Anglicans have gloried in Christendom. We have loved that sense of the church at the heart of every community, the implicit religion that might not involve coming to church, but knew that the priest would be there to do the ritual necessities when the time came. We were never keen on state religion, but that's a completely different thing – Christendom is in descent not form the kings who controlled the church, but from the popes who tried to control the kings. The divine society of the church is subservient to no-one, but

servant to everyone. It seeks to be the divine dimension in the life of the whole community, intertwined with it. And now society has said, no thanks. Not everywhere, no – in some places Christendom is holding out strongly, but the waves are lapping at the sand even there. There will continue to be sub-sets of society who wish that Christendom still existed, and would love to pretend that it did. But it doesn't – Christendom cannot be created or defended – once it is no longer universal, it is gone. And if we keep chasing it, we chase ourselves into the worst sorts of heritage religion, in which the church is of a piece with John Major's rhapsody to warm beer and cricket on the village green.

Importantly, I think that is one of the several reasons for the growth of evangelicalism within the church: evangelicals were never in the least interested in Christendom religion. So when other churches began to decline as Christendom waned, evangelicals were comparatively unaffected. The call to personal repentance and conversion immunised one part of the church against the malaise affecting the rest.

Because of this, for some Catholic Anglicans, the choice has seemed a stark dilemma – keep on doing what makes sense to you, and see your congregations slowly decline, and churches close; or become something different from what you truly are – start up non-eucharistic family services, run Alpha courses, downplay the communal, incarnational sacramental faith in favour of an individualistic approach. In other words, become a sort of evangelical. The problems with that are manifold. Most Catholics don't make very good evangelicals, because their heart isn't really in it. As a bishop, I rejoice in the life and strength of churches of all traditions, but I think it's essential the each church, and each person, live out faith in a way that is authentic to them. If your instincts are Catholic, evangelical ways of being the church are never likely to work well, because they are not mere techniques: they spring naturally from an evangelical theology and approach to church life.

The choice for Anglican Catholics is not: either become something you're not, or accept decline and eventual death. The third way is resurrection. The Catholic tradition has (not entirely, but to a large extent) got stuck in a rut – a rut of liturgical archaeology in part, compounded by the disarray within the tradition over the ordination of women. But it's to a very large extent a Christendom rut. Christendom has gone, but we are still having trouble recognising the fact, let alone doing anything about it. Catholics are notoriously difficult to interest in Fresh Expressions of church life, rarely present in discussion of church growth or church planting. We need to find ways of living the Catholic tradition into the situation we're now in – and to do so we need to look back.

The early church, which Catholic Anglicans have so loved, largely pre-dates Christendom – if we are to count it from the realm of Constantine. Before that, the church was always open to persecution, uncertain of its role and place, living in a social space defined by a quite different set of values and procedures. Each of those was individually completely different from the situation the church now faces in England, but together they create a pattern which I think must lead us to

explore what the church's mission meant in pre-Christendom undivided Catholicism, and to ask what can we learn for the Catholic tradition.

And to do that I turn to the work of an Anabaptist. Alan Kreider was Director of the Centre for Christianity and Culture at Regent's Park College in Oxford in the 1990s. While he was there he wrote a fascinating study entitled *Worship and evangelism in pre-Christendom*[1]. I believe that the story he tells is one which provides Catholic Anglicans with a completely new set of resources for engaging in mission – resources which do not require adopting an unfamiliar theological framework, still less dumbing down on the liturgy. That doesn't make it any less challenging, however.

Kreider begins by pointing out that the mission of the church – and he focuses on evangelism specifically, but I think his argument applies more widely – has no obvious causes. The constant risk of persecution presumably was not an incentive – but what was? Certainly not welcomers' services, because Christian worship was definitely off limits to anyone who was not a member of the community: even catechumens were only allowed to stay up to the prayers. There wasn't the scope for lots of public demonstration of Christian faith through organisations or public initiatives – all too risky. Certainly public preaching of the gospel wasn't really an option. So how did the church grow – because it did, and rapidly.

Kreider argues that the church grew, in essence, because its people were formed through their worship into a community who lived attractive lives. Liturgically formed ethical living led the church to grow, because people wanted to know what was behind this behaviour. Early Christians felt they had found something absolutely wonderful – and there's nothing so attractive as a wonderful secret that you aren't let in on. Cyprian compared the church to an enclosed garden – a garden of delight and flourishing, but definitely enclosed; not everyone can come in. How different that is from the Christendom model!

Kreider argues that the early church formed its believers in such a way that they shared with their neighbours what had made a difference to their lives – and lived it out. Christians talked about Jesus' teaching – especially the Sermon on the Mount. They didn't seem to think it was an impossible ideal. And they tried to do what Jesus said – particularly, to the consternation of pagans, loving their enemies. They lived values which were out of tune with their time, because they knew themselves to be citizens of a different kingdom. Persecution only pushed their faith into the public domain: Tertullian said that suffering 'is the bait that wins people for our school'.[2] But most people became Christian through casual contact. They realised that the Christians would be likely to help them when they were ill. Christians preached a gospel which set people free from bondage – all sorts of bondage. Cyprian spoke of his own conversion from addiction to power and success, as he came to follow Christ.

[1] Joint Liturgical Study 32 (Grove, 1995).
[2] Apology, 50.13.

The Christian community was conspicuously free from social stratification. The only group underrepresented were powerful men – the ones who had most to lose. The church was one of the very few places in which worshippers of both genders and from all classes, slave and free, were part of one body together. People gave generously – they supported one another in sickness. Testimony is given most powerfully by Julian, the ex-Christian emperor who attempted to restore paganism.

> 'It is their benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase their atheism … the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well.'[3]

The early church was very rigorous about the catechumenate – but even more so about who could enter it. If you were living a lifestyle the church didn't accept – like being a soldier – you simply couldn't begin. Similarly, completing the catechumenate wasn't judged by time, let alone by doctrinal examination. It was quality of life which demonstrated whether an enquirer was ready for baptism. Kreider agues that the point of the catechumenate was not so much to impart information as to form people into a new way of being – to make them citizens of the kingdom of heaven. During this time they learnt a new history of themselves, and learnt new habits of behaviour – they learnt to be Christians through practical examples. So when they came to baptism, the questions asked, according to the *Apostolic Tradition*, were not so much doctrinal as ethical: 'Have they honoured the widows? Have they visited the sick? Have they done every kind of good work?[4]

And Kreider argues that just as the catechumenate formed new believers into this way of life, the worshipping life of the community was all designed to help them remain within it, by continually re-emphasising in both word and deed the distinctive calling of Christians, and the difference of their community life form the world around. The liturgy encapsulated the enclosed garden into which Christians were invited. The peace shared among all believers, the common meal, the prayers, the teaching in the sermon – both word and action reinforced the message that the Christian way of living was unique.

So now what do we learn from the early church that can resource us in our post-Christendom context? We certainly don't need to follow every detail: there's no need to exclude the non-baptised from worship! What I detect is a rather more profound common thread which runs through the early church's life, and resonates with the incarnational and sacramental approach to faith which is at the core of Anglican Catholicity.

Our call to mission is one that has changed because of our changing culture, but it certainly need not mean that we accommodate ourselves to it. I find Michael Ramsey's statement very powerful that "Individualism has no place in

[3] Juian, Ep 22.
[4] Apostolic Tradition, 20.

Christianity, and Christianity, verily, means its extinction"[5]. One of the key means to mission for the church in post-Christendom will be to live out authentic Christian faith as the early church did, in a way that is clearly distinctive and quite possibly at odds with contemporary culture – and which certainly isn't tied into a culture of individualism. Authenticity becomes a vital category just as the unquestioned external authority which existed in Christendom is dying, and if the church is to have a mission today it must demonstrate that quality. That is what the present Pope is admired for: the authentic life that he is perceived to lead, in which his personal actions are at one with his theological principles. But despite his present fame, there is a deeper issue which isn't resolved, because authenticity as presently understood is completely tied up with the individualistic and narcissistic couture of self-fulfilment: to be authentic is to be self-sufficient. The church will I believe witness strongly to its distinctiveness if we can practice an authentic living which lives in community, not in isolation.

Charles Taylor, the great Catholic thinker, points out in *The Ethics of Authenticity*[6] that the notion of authenticity develops through history as the locus of connection with 'the good' – for us, God – moves away from an external authority source, and becomes internalised. This vision of personal authenticity is not a mere internalisation of external authority – a carrying around within ourselves an authority figure always telling us off, but a discovery that it is through our deepest inner selves that we encounter the source of our selves. The important part of Taylor's argument for me is that personal authenticity does not necessarily imply that it is illegitimate for anyone else to have any influence over my actions. An authenticity that has its roots in my own connectedness with myself and with God, does not necessarily mean that freedom has to be completely self-determined too. As Taylor says 'it would take a great deal of effort … to *prevent* our identity being formed by the people we love'[7].

As Catholics, faith is first and foremost the faith of the Church. Our individual faith relationships with God are formed within that body of which we are part by baptism. That means that our own faith is formed in relationship – it's never just us and God. So if as Catholics we are to present the faith in our culture, we have to resource one another in living out a common life, a shared narrative. It is in that life as a body together that we both grow in faith, and demonstrate our difference form the world around us.

That is also at the heart of our mission and our evangelism. It's not just for us: we're saying that this is how all human beings are designed to find fulfilment. If we are to have meaningful lives at all, we cannot construct them without being in relationship. We cannot make meaningful choices unless we have some sense of how and why some choices are better than others – and that sense of worth cannot be generated out of the individual alone.

> "I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of

[5] *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (Longmans, 2nd edn., 1956), 38.
[6] Harvard University Press, 1991.
[7] Ibid., 34.

> solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters."[8]

So if we are to be authentically individual, we must also be connected to that which makes our lives meaningful. And that connection is not made through a hierarchical authority, which tells us what to believe, but through an active participation in the life of the body. In fact it has already been expressed in another of the ancient Christian paradoxes: 'the life I live now, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me'; 'it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me'. So in order to tell most meaningfully the story of myself, we must also be telling the story of Jesus. And in doing that, we cannot avoid telling the story of Jesus' body, which is the church.

And so if we am to be authentic in our own faith, we cannot avoid the challenge of living alongside our brothers and sisters in Christ, and paying attention not just to our own wishes but to theirs as well. Our own spirituality, then, is only my own when it is shared; it becomes deeper as we become more deeply involved in the life of God, which is also through the Holy Spirit the life of the Church.

The first step in Catholic mission is to learn to live authentically in Christian community – to demonstrate that lives lived for and with one another are more fulfilling than lives lived in the freedom and isolation of individualism. And in the Catholic tradition we have great resources for doing exactly that – precisely the same resources that the early church had – the liturgy.

Interestingly, that is exactly the same point that Alan Kreider comes to in a later book he wrote with his wife Eleanor[9]. The community formed by the liturgy is the evangelistic body, and it is formed through the recovery of our story: a story which is not just an account of the past, but our own story too.

I was leading worship in a parish church, and the readers came up to lectern – well-educated people, long-term church members. The lack of understanding and interest with which they read the lessons was palpable. This was not their story that was being told. On the other hand, when they wanted to talk to me afterwards about the problems besetting their parish, they were voluble, articulate and mostly polite. There was passion and there was thoughtfulness. But the idea that the scripture might be a resource for working out what they should do had not I think occurred to them. Many of those people have been shaped by their faith, at an almost unconscious level: so they did in most cases exhibit more grace than one might expect about a really difficult situation. But they had no explicit resources: they didn't naturally turn to the story of faith in order to transform the present, very difficult story of their parish into something different. It was a classic case of Christendom.

It is that sort of re-union of the Christian story into the story of our congregations and the individuals within them, which is one of the key

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[8] Ibid., 40.
[9] *Worship and Mission after Christendom*, Paternoster 2009.

ingredients for a Catholic mission which will demonstrate new life – which will lead to church growth without complicated initiatives.

Let's hear someone who really brought the church's stories up against his own story – Jeremy Clarkson. The website *Resistance and Renewal* described his recent rant against the church leaders' letter on poverty like this:

> The response in The Sun today by Jeremy Clarkson caught my eye because he goes to the heart of the matter and does his own form of Bible study, analysing Jesus' story about The Rich Man and the beggar Lazarus in Luke 16. And he comes up with the following conclusion:
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> "The Bible is basically a blueprint for Marxism. In Luke 16:19-31 we are told that those who work hard and buy nice things for themselves and their families will burn for all of eternity in hell. And those who sit about doing nothing all day will go to heaven."
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> Clarkson's take on the story is telling. In the Bible, Jesus talks of a beggar named Lazarus who was 'laid' at a rich man's gate, 'covered in sores' and desperately hungry. For Clarkson he is just 'someone who sits about doing nothing all day'.
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> This is exactly the kind of language that so many right wing commentators use to describe those who are poor. Through being labelled as cheats and scroungers, often the ill, disabled and poor are simply condemned as being lazy.
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> At least Clarkson is not mealy mouthed or trying to pretend that his views are compatible with Christianity. In fact he is very clear about what he think of Christian leaders and of Jesus' teaching:
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> "I certainly don't want the country to be run by someone who believes in that codswallop. Or who believes that the meek will inherit the earth. Or that it's wrong to covet your neighbour's BMW." …[10]

Jeremy Clarkson has got the contradiction between the church's story, and Jesus' story, and the story of individualist hedonist consumption – the religion of which he appears to be the high priest. And not surprisingly for the leader of another faith, he wants nothing to do with it. But how is it that he gets it, when the church so often doesn't?

I think the reason is that we are still telling the story as if Christendom existed: as if we were reinforcing something which existed in the wider culture, and which just needs gentle nudges to be kept on course; a culture in which the Scripture readings are presumed to be relevant, and so we don't need o do all that much with them. But that's not where we are any more. If we do nothing

[10] http://resistanceandrenewal.net/2014/02/23/the-bible-is-a-blueprint-for-marxism-the-theology-of-jeremy-clarkson/, accessed 16 / 4 / 14.

more than tell the stories in a Christendom style, they will not connect – and they do not connect – not only with those outside the church, but even with Christians themselves. Authentic Christian living in Christendom depends on re-connecting with the story of faith.

Worship which renews that connection will have to be different from what we are used to – but that doesn't mean that it need be foreign. The task of discernment – the theological task – is to disentangle the living tradition from the accretions of Christendom. That's not easy – and there are people whose faith relationship, such as it is, is genuinely connected to Christ only through what I would call an accretion. That is what is at the root of a lot of the pain in liturgical change. But in any living church there will be a story to tell of Jesus which is not wholly reducible to its particular format or setting. It is that story that needs to be discovered and set free. It is sharing in that story which will lead into lives of authentic faith.

There are many practical ways in which this can be; I want to dwell briefly on one fundamental principle which underlies all of the different steps we might take in different worshipping communities. The people of God will have to learn to talk. Christendom worship is passive worship: all the big decisions have been made. It's about reinforcing obedience, or at best encouraging activity once you've got outside church. But that won't do. If a story as counter-cultural as ours is to take root in people's lives, it will only do so if they are able to speak it as well as hear it.

Christendom is inarticulate. Faith is absorbed through the practices of going to church, sharing in the ritual life, knowing the pattern. The efforts of clergy to teach the catechism only produced it as another ritual – not a vital resource for living. As I go around the parishes in the parts of my Area where Christendom is coming to an end, I speak to elderly congregations about the way in which faith was inculcated to them – and then have to tell them that it won't happen to the next generation. If they want their church to live, they will need to find ways of making explicit what has never been talked about. And there are huge reserves of fear and anxiety among Anglicans about doing that.

Learning to talk about faith will be for many Anglicans the equivalent of learning to speak another language – a task fraught with fear of failure, embarrassment at not being able to say what you want, exasperation and humiliation. Much easier to let someone else do it. So if it is to happen at all, it has to happen in the safe environment – one hopes – of the church community. It is there that we make and re-make the connections. Just as the early church's worship was devoted to forming a people in ways of living which were contrary to the norms of the day, so should ours be.

The formation of Christian identity come through our connection with the story of Jesus through the story of the church – but that story is not only told through verbal means. Learning to let that story become our own doesn't stop with finding the words – in fact it is often through performing actions that the words begin to come more naturally. The epigram for Bishop David Stancliffe's *God's*

Pattern sums it up: 'Now I know why churches are true,' said a four year old watching a televised service from one of our cathedrals: 'The people in them enjoy singing, and walk about in patterns.'[11]

It is as we act out faith, in worship and in service, that it becomes real in our bodies; that is just as important as its reality in our words. In the same way that we have to overcome the passivity of a Christendom approach in our speaking about faith, we also need to do so in our liturgical life. A liturgical, eucharistically centred pattern of worship would at first glance provide great opportunities for doing so easily – but not so, in my experience. Liturgy has become a show that other people do, often not very well. Because it lacks connection with peoples' own stories, it can be experienced as irrelevant. It can become valued precisely because of its irrelevance – 'worship allows me to forget about all the other things I've got to deal with for a while'. Well, that's a perfectly legitimate goal for a soap opera, but it's not the point of Christian worship. The Kreiders, radical Protestants from the Mennonite tradition, speak powerfully about the eucharist as a tool for the church's mission:

> The Eucharist commits the worshipers to participate in God's mission. In it, the believers, in the presence of Christ their host, renew their commitment to the "new covenant in his blood". As they do so, they enter into his mission and his politics … Through the Eucharist, Christ reconciles his disciples to God and makes them ministers of reconciliation to their neighbors and enemies.[12]

The identity which is formed by this counter-cultural worship is profoundly catholic – far more profoundly Catholic than Christendom ever could be. It is an identity which is rooted in baptism as the entry into a people of God whose identity can never be subsumed into that of any nation.

The Kreiders again:

> The God whom we worship is the God whose mission is comprehensive reconciliation; as we worship God, God's reconciling mission forms us. If gives us a sense of what our lives are for – to participate in that part of the *missio Dei* which is God's call to us. It also gives us our primary identity. To be sure, we have many identities – family, ethnic, national. But more important than any of these is our identity as members of God's family. This family is worldwide: the catholic composition of its membership anticipates the completion of God's mission.[13]

This catholic sense of the mission of God is one we share with the pre-Christendom church. Returning to Alan Kreider:

> There was something catholic, something universal about the life [the early Christians] shared with others throughout the empire and beyond; and significantly, when under pressure, they often expressed their primary identity in a simple affirmation of allegiance to Christ: 'I am a Christian' … The sheer largeness of the vision was bracing. God was saving individuals, to be sure, but as part of his grand design for 'the

[11] SPCK, 2003.
[12] *Worship and Mission after Christendom*, 147.
[13] *Ibid.*, 176

> reconciliation and restoration of the human race'. Small wonder that these Christian communities, which appeared to be so marginal, had a self-confidence that was attractive. They believed that they were the instruments that God was using to construct a new world.'[14]

Catholic mission springs from this conviction – that in God the whole creation is being renewed, and we are instruments of that renewal. It is that conviction which unites service and proclamation into one seamless living out of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Charles Taylor points out that the notion of authenticity can be traced back to St Augustine 'who saw the road to God as passing through our own reflexive awareness of ourselves'[15]. The truest form of authenticity then, is to live perfectly in the love of God. It is the way of life summed up in one of St Augustine's most famous sayings (with a little more context than usual):

> "[T]he deeds of men are only discerned by the root of charity ... Once for all, then, a short precept is given you: Love, and do what you will: whether you hold your peace, through love hold your peace; whether you cry out, through love cry out; whether you correct, through love correct; whether you spare, through love do you spare: let the root of love be within, of this root can nothing spring but what is good. "[16]

Here is the freedom of real creativity; the more we live immersed in the love of God, the freer we are to follow our instincts, which God is making holy. Anyone can see of course how dangerous that can be, what a justification for all sorts of dreadful behaviour – unless we are constrained by the love of the Christian community around us, pointing us away from our own self-deceit and in the direction of love. It's not easy to live that way – in fact it's nearly impossible. It needs the support of the church's sacraments and prayer. But insofar as we are formed by our worship into people whose first instinct is love, we will not be able to help living out that mission in the world.

The key note of Catholic mission should be joy – joy in the love of God shown in the incarnation of Christ, joy in the goodness of the creation of which we're part, joy in the sacramental life of the church, joy in our own hearts. The Catholic tradition at its best leads directly into mission because it is a way of finding out what the life of love is like, and then having the resources to live it. It is our raison d'être:

> "The point of the Church, if you like, is that glory may dwell in our land ..., the glory of God in transfigured human faces".[17]

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[14] Worship & Evangelism in Pre-Christendom, 12.
[15] *The Ethics of Authenticity,* 27.
[16] Homily 7 on the First Epistle of John, sec. 8, accessed at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/170207.htm, 16.4.14.
[17] http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1779/the-church-gods-pilot-project, accessed 16/4/14.