

The Roots of Our Anglo-Catholic Tradition

Sermon, Feast of the Dedication, November 7, 2010

Grace Episcopal Church, Elmira, NY

Deacon Daisy Kirkpatrick

1 Kings 8:22-30, Psalm 84:1-6, 1 Peter 2:1-5, 9-10, Matthew 21:12-16

Lex orandi, lex credendi. These Latin words translated literally say “the law of prayer is the law of faith.” What they mean is that the way we pray shapes the way we believe.¹ This is of central importance especially in our Anglo-Catholic parish where we place so much emphasis on our liturgy and worship experience. Today, on the feast of the Dedication of our Parish, Dr. Brent Olmstead will talk about the history of Grace Church; and I will attempt to place our history within its wider context.

Our story begins in England about the time of the Reformation. When Henry VIII had his fight with the Pope, it was not his intention to leave the worship of the Catholic Church, but rather to get control of the Church in England away from the domination by Rome. Henry always considered himself a good Catholic.² But Archbishop Cranmer, the author of the Book of Common Prayer, had spent time on the continent and been influenced by the Reformation, specifically Zwingli, and so the Prayer Book, published in 1549 two years after Henry’s death, was less “catholic” than the old king might have wished.

Edward VI, a child of nine, succeeded Henry. Under the Regency Council the reforming of the Church continued, and a second, more protestant version of the Prayer Book, was published in 1552. But Edward died at the age of sixteen and Mary, a fanatical Roman Catholic, attempted to restore the Church of Rome in England. Called Bloody Mary, she executed 284 people, mostly by burning at the stake as heretics, Archbishop Cranmer among them. Elizabeth succeeded Mary in 1558. An historian has commented: “The two sixteenth-century English leaders with the greatest influence on the eventual character of Anglicanism were the martyred cleric Thomas Cranmer, the primary architect of the Book of Common Prayer, and his goddaughter, the royal laywoman, Elizabeth Tudor, whose consistent policies during her long reign allowed the Settlement to shape religious attitudes and convictions.”³ The Elizabethan Settlement affirmed English independence from foreign powers, established the monarch as the head of the Church in England, and adopted the 1552 Book of Common Prayer for use in worship. The Settlement established the *via media*, the middle way, between Rome and the Protestants, who were called Puritans in England.

In the next three centuries the history of England and its Church is turbulent, fascinating, and completely beyond the scope of this sermon. There were many factors that set the stage for the Oxford Movement: the Puritans under Cromwell, the papists in the Restoration, the Calvinist monarchs, and the evangelism of the Wesleys, to name a few. However, the rise in the 17th century of the Age of Enlightenment profoundly affected the Church in both Europe and America. Primarily due to recent scientific discoveries and populist revolutions in America and France, the Enlightenment advocated reason as the primary source for legitimacy and authority.

¹ cf. Mitchell, Leonel. L., *Praying Shapes Believing: A Theological Commentary on the Book of Common Prayer*, Morehouse Publishing, 1985, p. 1.

² Moorman, J. R. H., *A History of the Church in England*, 3rd Ed., Morehouse Publishing, 1980, p. 177.

³ Hugaard, William P., “From the Reformation to the Eighteenth Century” in Sykes, Stephen, Booty, & Knight, *The Study of Anglicanism*, Rev. Ed., SPCK, Fortress Press, 1998, p. 10.

At its core was a critical questioning of traditional institutions, customs, and morals, and a strong belief in rationality and science. The practice in the Church became increasingly protestant. The clergy felt that matters of doctrine, liturgical practice, and ecclesiastical organization were of relatively little importance, focusing instead on preaching of the Word. Holy Communion took place only four times a year, and the usual Sunday service was the Great Litany, Morning Prayer, and a two-hour sermon.

I remember John Kevern, my seminary professor of liturgics, talking about the Enlightenment Churches, with large windows, clear glass, and white paint. Everything can be seen very clearly; there is no mystery at all, everything is rational. The main thrust of the Oxford Movement was to restore the sense mystery and devotion.

In 1833 a group of spiritual leaders at Oriel College Oxford started writing a series of pamphlets called *Tracts for the Times*. This attempted to stir the established Church into new life by reviving certain Roman Catholic doctrines and rituals. John Henry Newman, John Keble and Richard Froude were central to this Movement. They preached Anglicanism as a *via media* between Roman Catholicism and the prevailing customs in the Church. They promoted deep and personal devotion to the teaching of the Bible and higher standards of ritual and worship. They advocated the return of vestments, candles, incense and music; this had a profound effect on church architecture. This did not happen without controversy. There was considerable resistance to reintroducing customs that were considered “popish.” Within the Tractarian group there were difficulties also. Several of those involved left the Church of England for the Roman Catholic Church. Most notable among these was John Henry Newman who went on to become a cardinal.

The Oxford movement crossed the Atlantic and the Church of the Advent in Boston was founded in 1844. But the Civil War interfered with further liturgical developments. The Church of St. Mary the Virgin was not founded until 1868, and St. Clements in Philadelphia in 1869. In the spring of 1888, Grace Church, Elmira hosted a Parish Preaching Mission led by the Rev. Percy Webber of Boston. He brought the principles of the Oxford Movement to this parish. As a result of the enthusiasm he engendered, the Sacraments became the primary focus of worship; and Grace has been a stalwart example of the Anglo-Catholic tradition ever since.

The lections today speak to the importance of the temple, the house of the Lord. It was thought that the location of the Lord was in the holy of holies. But Peter talks about allowing ourselves to be built into a spiritual house. There is a booklet about Grace Church, which is all about the building, the architecture and appointments. There is not one picture of a person. To me, this conveys the wrong message. The church is not the building; it is the people. The church is not the rector; it is not the endowment. It is all very well to have pride in our architecture and to care for the building, but we need to remember it is not the Church. It is all right to husband our resources, but that stewardship must not be at the cost of doing effective ministry inside and outside of our walls. The Church is the people, all of us gathered here this morning, and others who are not present but who support our work. We come together, we pray together, we worship together. This is the Church. We have chosen Grace Church because of our style of prayer. Our prayer shapes our faith. This is who we are.

And now to Him whose Power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.⁴

⁴ Ephesians 3:20-21