

Grace

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PARISH PRIEST'S REPORT

The primate of the Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefforts Shori, recently ordained a new bishop for the Diocese of Virginia. Afterwards, she met with diocesan clergy for a wide open and wide ranging conversation. In her opening remarks, Bishop Katharine talked about the health of the church – something of little interest to newspaper headline writers and the communications media generally, not to mention the disease-infested swampland of internet blogs. Paying attention to what passes for news is an increasingly dangerous occupation. Over large stretches of the past two or three years, I confess to struggling with what I would call low level depression induced by following church news. I also confess to huge disillusionment with the Archbishop of Canterbury and most other church leaders. What on earth are we to make of endless and seemingly intractable fights over Christian doctrine and human behaviour in the Anglican Communion? What about primates and archbishops behaving like spoilt children, hurling ecclesiastical thunderbolts at one another across the globe? How can character assassination and naked blackmail find any place in the community of faith? Is there nothing more to us than human anxiety and fear? Can the church possibly survive? Indeed, does the church even deserve to survive?

These are serious questions, and I am not in the business of sweeping them aside in some naïve attempt to make us feel better. Neither do I think for a moment that Bishop Katharine is a rose-coloured-spectacle sort of person. On the contrary, all the evidence

suggests that she is a clear-sighted, gracious and decisive leader, undismayed by the storms swirling around us; someone whose comments on the health of the church express eloquently what we already know in our bones. I suppose this is why the Presiding Bishop's remarks caught my eye. "One of the great gifts of serving in this position is that I get to travel around the church and see what's going on. I get to meet people and hear stories about how the church lives its life in different places and contexts. And there's enormous good news in that. Every diocese I have gone to visit has stories of health and vitality to tell. I discovered last week that some people were annoyed by my talking about that. But I talk about that certainly because it's true, but also because I think it's essential to counteract what the headlines have to say about the Episcopal Church, which is a tiny fraction of what is going on. The stories of health and vitality come from congregations and people and communities who are paying attention to the needs of their neighbours, and are engaged in that mission to serve the world. I think that's great and glorious good news and there simply needs to be more of it, and teach the other parts of the church or challenge other parts of the church to be about that work as well."

Now when I say we already know in our bones that this is true, what I mean is that the thunder and lightning on the horizon seem a very long way from the Church of Perth and from our own eucharistic community. Not only is the international scuffling only a fraction of our story, but we could be forgiven for wondering if it takes place in some fictional church in a parallel universe. This is not, of course, to suggest that we can simply ignore what is going on elsewhere as having nothing to do with us, withdrawing into our own cosy cocoon and refusing to take any responsibility for it. It is to acknowledge the fact that issues generating so much heat in some people and places are on the whole non-issues here. In other words, like it or not, we are caught up in a struggle between true and false, between faith and fear, between the divine and the demonic. Perhaps this sounds a little dramatic, even melodramatic, but given what is at stake I really don't think so. Talking of struggling with depression is to recognise the force of the false and the demonic. It is about feeling swamped, overwhelmed, helpless, too small to make any difference as a fearful church becomes narrower and nastier. But is it really the case that the church is in such bad shape, and is it really the case that our own little Christian community and others like it have no power?

Recently, several experiences seem to be lifting the cloud. The church of Trinità del Monte at the top of the Spanish Steps is right in the noisy heartland of tourist Rome. Here you meet the Jerusalem community singing vespers at the end of the day, making eucharist together, young monks and nuns living “in the heart of the city, in the heart of God”. They are called not to pastoral work, but to contemplation – to the long journey of conversion and growth into God. Their life is composed on the traditional monastic elements of public and private prayer, community life, part-time work, silence and solitude, bound by the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, obedience, and in a spirit of humility and joy. They are sisters and brothers of Jerusalem, because they deliberately seek God in the urban context of city life. They form tiny pockets of Christian faithfulness, far removed from centres of ecclesiastical power and ecclesiastical bullying – even in Rome! In simplicity and beauty, going quietly and generously about the real business of following Christ, they renew our hope. Hope also insinuated itself into my black cloud in the Basilica of Santa Chiara in Assisi. Again, we were gathered for vespers, this time sung by the sisters of Saint Clare in the presence of the ancient Byzantine crucifix instrumental in kindling the Franciscan movement in 1205. In a broken-down chapel, a powerless young man heard the voice of this wide-eyed Christ: “Francis, rebuild my church, which as you see is falling all to ruin”. And he did so; and he does so still. Not, of course, that I needed to travel half way around the world for my spirit to lighten. Week by week right here it happens too as we simply get on with being Christ’s disciples, gathering to hear his word and celebrating his sacraments as his family, chosen and called. We do so that he may send us out as love letters to this city and to his world. Everyone is welcome here without exception, and not because we are indifferent, or because welcome is the beginning and end of catholic faith. We expect transformation and conversion in our own Christ’s way and in God’s good time, which means we can afford to be patient and gentle with each other. Grace builds on nature and perfects it; God wants us to be our true selves; grace cannot and will not make us someone else. Accepting each other at face value, we go on together, sharing the pilgrimage, trusting Christ to accomplish his will in us.

In other words, like most of the churches in Bishop Katharine’s care the storm does not succeed in distracting us from the primary tasks of worship, ministry, and mission, and this is great and glorious good news. None of us need feel swamped, overwhelmed, depressed,

paralysed, defeated. No Christian church is ever powerless, too small to make any difference. The headlines only skim the surface of what is going on. When darkness seems to be closing in, think of the Family of Jerusalem "in the heart of the city, in the heart of God". When the talk is about difference and division, disintegration and destruction, remember those Poor Clares singing evening after evening in Assisi: they have been doing it now for a thousand years. Or simply look across the waters of the font, look at the people sitting opposite you as we explore the scriptures, look into the eyes of others stretching out empty hands around Christ's table. The gates of hell shall not prevail against this love - we have the crucified and living Lord's word on that. But his call is insistent, his voice as fresh as ever: "Rebuild my church, which as you see is falling all to ruin".

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