

Relationships Ritual and Religion

“The Decision I have arrived at through this Season of Discernment”

March 6th 2011

The Reverend Jonathan Gibson

This is the presentation Jonathan Gibson made to his Anglican Diocese of Calgary congregation, St. Augustine’s, explaining his decision to become licensed in the Anglican Network in Canada.

My dear brothers and sisters,

I am so appreciative that you are taking the time to be here this afternoon as I talk with you about:

“Relationships, Ritual and Religion: The decision I have arrived at through this Season of Discernment”

In 1st John 3:1-2 are these magnificent words:

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

I have quoted these words at the beginning of my presentation this afternoon because I want to think with you about the Church as the family lovingly cared for and guided by our Father in Heaven. John states that we are God’s children. What we will be when we see Jesus as he is has not yet been revealed to us. We will have to await the future to know how our relationship will be even fuller then. However, we can know within this life we are brothers and sisters one to another which is enriched by knowing God as our Father.

I want to think about this picture of family as I talk with you about the importance of relationships; rituals and religion. I want to begin by describing how important they are to families and then move into discussing how relationships rituals and religion relate to the family of the Church.

Relationships are essential to families. Healthy families express love and care for one another in ways that allow husband and wife and children to know they are valued and highly cherished. Those who belong to healthy family units are treated with respect and their identity is honoured. Relationships are the lifeblood of any family unit. Yet relationships alone are not enough. It is important to have means by which familial loyalties are made more secure. Two ways this happens is through ritual and religion.

By ritual, I mean those traditions within a family that help to give this unit self-definition by expressing their common beliefs. There are rituals families enjoy at certain times of the year. Special meals to mark important dates like birthdays, holidays and family activities are rituals intended to strengthen family ties. The daily sharing of meals is also a ritual shaping family life.

By religion, I mean the word in a positive sense. The root of the word "religion" can be traced to the Latin:

religare

re: back

ligare: to bind

so that the term is associated with "being bound back." Members of families are bound to each other. In order for the family to live in a way so that members can trust each other there are expectations and structure helping to direct how the members of a family will live with each other. I am using the word religion as synonymous with what we would call the house rules and mutual expectations established by family members.

I want to stress rituals and religious duties are never ends in and of themselves, but are always there in the service of the relationships. However, familial relationships that are secure pay attention to the rituals and religion (house rules).

If relationships as the lifeblood of family life, I see rituals and religion as the flesh and bones giving the family relationships structure.

When it comes to the family of the Church, relationships, ritual and religion also matter. What is most important are the relationships: Our relationship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and our relationships with one another.

Within the family of the Church, we strengthen our relationships through shared rituals and religion. Weekly we gather for the ritual meal of the Eucharist. We also have certain expectations about how we will order our life together in community. This is what I refer to as our religious practices.

Both our rituals and religion are to be in the service of our relationships with God and each other. When we separate ritual and religion from relationships, then rituals can be lifeless and religion legalistic. When the rituals and religion serve relationships in ways subordinate to the relationships then they become gifts enabling a deepening of love for God and each other within the Church family.

For me, these three words are helpful in understanding what is happening in the Anglican Church of Canada today. I believe there is increasingly a lack of clarity on our understanding of our relationship with God. This in turn is resulting in a redefining of the rituals and religion causing confusion and strain within the Church today.

Relationship with God:

Let me talk in more detail about relationships, especially relationship with God. The Bible is clear from its first to last chapter that while God is transcendent, that is God is beyond time. God is also personal and interacts with those of us who live within time. When biblically informed Christians say the name “God” this is not an impersonal abstract noun. Rather it is the one whom John at the beginning of his First Epistle describes this way:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— 2 the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—

Here John expresses Jesus’ eternal nature, his transcendence; coupled with his human nature, his immanence. The eternal life of God is present to us in the person of Jesus. In his Gospel account, John says the same thing even more succinctly:

“ the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”.

The Biblical teaching in passages like this is explicit in revealing to us God’s character is such that He is relational. This is why Jesus refers to him as

“Our Father in Heaven”.

What I am illustrating here is how evident the biblical witness is in describing God as personal and deeply loving. So when John in his Epistle says:

“See with what love the Father has loved us”

he understands God in the most personal terms human language can convey.

And yet today increasingly in mainline Churches, like the Anglican Church of Canada, God is no longer being understood and taught this way, The personal God is being replaced by thinking of God as in impersonal force at best, or non-existent at worst.

Take for instance the writings of Gretta Vosper. She is a United Church Minister from Toronto who in 2008 released a book entitled:

Life with or without God

Gretta Vosper heads up:

“The Centre for Progressive Christianity”

In Calgary there is an organization called:

“The Wisdom Centre”

It is styled after the Centre for Progressive Christianity. There are Anglican Churches in the city that have affiliated themselves with the Wisdom Centre. Christ Church Elbow Park and St. Laurence in Lake View are leading congregations in the Wisdom Centre. In Spring 2008, the Wisdom Centre invited Gretta Vosper to come and speak at an interdenominational event here.

In ***Life with or without God*** is this quote on page 316:

There are no supernatural beings, forces, or energies necessary for or even mindful of our survival.

Ms. Vosper does not believe in the biblical God and she is clear in stating that Jesus was not in any way the God/Man the New Testament explicitly teaches.

She is not alone in her views. On February 27th 2011 on a show called Tapestry on CBC there was an hour long episode entitled:

“Preachers Who do not believe in God.”

Mark Rutledge, a campus Minister at Duke University in North Carolina was one of the people interviewed. I am quoting verbatim what he said on CBC:

The God I do believe in is a process of creativity that works within both the Cosmos and the creation. God is a process of creativity within human beings that makes for great love and justice. I see God as a process that works within human evolution, nature and history but not as a separate being from the Universe.

These views are ones finding increasing acceptance and affirmation within mainline protestant Christianity. Mr. Rutledge in his interview also spoke about how formative the Jesus Seminar has been in shaping his thinking. The leaders of the Jesus Seminar, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Cossin, have rejected the key tenants of the Christian Faith and these influences are very much at play within our own Diocese and the Anglican Church of Canada. There is a course offered in churches in the Diocese called:

Living the Questions

This course is based on the work of the Jesus Seminar and is very much in keeping with the understanding of God expressed by the likes of Gretta Vosper and Mark Rutledge.

Therefore, my concern is this. How can the church on the one hand have preachers who teach:

“The word was made flesh and dwelt among us”

And other preachers who see God as

“a process that works within human evolution, nature and history but not as a separate being from the Universe”.

These are mutually contradictory understandings. If a family tried to relate to one another where the children were taught contradictory things about their parents, such a family would be confused, disjointed and disunited.

This is why I see the heart of the problem in the Anglican Church of Canada, has do with how we understand and relate to God. In the Church today people can teach views that contradict the biblical witness. Rather than being disciplined for this they are commended. See for example how Bishop Michael Ingham was applauded in our Diocesan Newsletter in advance of his February 5-6th engagement at Christ Church:

“Bishop Ingham is one of the most thoughtful and thought-provoking bishops in the worldwide Anglican Church.”

Bishop Ingham would be supportive of Gretta Vosper’s ideas and yet within the Anglican Church of Canada he viewed as a respected scholar.

Rituals of meaning:

As the language we use to relate to God is becoming increasingly confused within the Anglican Church of Canada so too the rituals that help to give shape to are familial life are also being distorted.

Two Thirds of Anglicans today, as represented by their Primates, have stated their Provinces are in a state of impaired Communion with the Anglican Church of Canada. Because of what has transpired in Canada over the past decade, they cannot in good conscience share in that ritual most representative of our unity: the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

The Invitation to Confession in the Book of Common Prayer reads:

Ye that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbours, and intend to lead the new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near with faith, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort; and make your humble confession to Almighty God, meekly kneeling upon your knees.

The reason why two thirds of Anglicans cannot share in the Sacrament of Communion with North American Anglicans is because there has not been repentance for actions taken in the last decade and there is not the desire to live in accordance with the commandments of God.

The unwillingness of some members of the Anglican family to share in the sacramental meal of Communion with other members of the Anglican family is for me is an indicator of the seriousness of the trouble in which we find ourselves.

This is compounded further by the way other rituals are being conducted within the Anglican Church of Canada. Most notably, the ritual of ordination. In the Book of Common Prayer the bishop asks of those about to be ordained:

WILL you be diligent to frame and fashion your own selves, and your families, according to the doctrine of Christ; and to make both yourselves and them, as much as in you lieth, wholesome examples and patterns to the Flock of Christ?

The ordinand answers the question this way:

I will apply myself thereto, the Lord being my helper.

The New Testament is so clear on teaching that those who are called to ordained office in the Church are to fashion their lives in an exemplary way. This is why Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:

3:1 The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. 2 Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 4 He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, 5 for if someone

does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. 7 Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

The only professional quality mentioned in this passages is "able to teach". All of the other qualities are attributes of character.

I think that within the Anglican Church of Canada we have lost sight of this biblical focus and Prayer Book direction. Men and women are now being ordained or appointed to senior positions within the Church who are in openly same gendered relationships. Consider the following:

- i) Peter Elliot and Paul Kennington are the Deans of Cathedrals. Mr. Elliot is Dean of Christ Church Cathedral Vancouver and Mr. Kennington is Dean of Christ Church Cathedral Montreal. Both men are in partnered same sex relationships.
- ii) Joyce Barnett was ordained priest in Toronto, Sept 2010. She is married to a woman.

I find this troubling because such actions state the mind of the Anglican Church of Canada to fully endorse homosexual practice as acceptable within the Church and ordained leaders are modeling this practice. This shows that the ritual of ordination with the Anglican Church of Canada is moving away from the teaching of scripture and the ethos of the Book of Common Prayer and incorporating practices that cannot be supported by the biblical witness.

The other ritual where this is happening increasingly is in the area of the Blessings of Same Sex unions. At the General Synod held in Winnipeg in June 2007 Resolution A 187 was debated:

That this General Synod affirm the authority and jurisdiction of any diocesan synod:

- a) with the concurrence of the diocesan Bishop; and***
- b) in a manner which respects the conscience of the incumbent and the will of the parish, to authorize the blessing of committed same sex unions.***

Although the resolution was carried in the order of the laity and priests, it was defeated in the order of Bishops. Even though no motion has been passed since the defeat of A 187 in June of 2007, eight Dioceses have implemented rites of same sex blessings since then.

To me this is a further example of practices that are a clear contradiction of the teaching of Scripture.

Religious Governance:

This last example is also a helpful bridge into talking with you about our religious life. Remember I said at the beginning of my presentation the word religion means to bind back and is a word that we can say is synonymous with house rules. All families need to have agreed upon procedures if their life is to be lived in safety and with trust.

The example of Dioceses choosing going ahead with same sex blessings even though the motion legitimizing such action was defeated is illustrative of a disregard for the family rules. This example is symptomatic of the larger problem faced by the Anglican Communion at this time because of actions taken in North America.

I have detailed elsewhere in our discernment process, notably in the questions I answered on January 15th 2011, how actions taken in North America in relation to homosexual practice have torn the fabric of the Communion in an unprecedented way.

Most recently this was evidenced by the number of Primates who stayed away from the January Primate's Meeting held in Dublin. On January 21st 2011 Primates from the Global South issued a statement explaining why they would not attend the Dublin meeting:

“Unless and until there is unequivocal commitment to honour the agreed basis of Lambeth Resolution 1.10 and implement the decisions of previous Primates’ Meetings (2005, 2007, 2009) expressed in the respective Communiqués, especially that of Dar es Salem 2007, it will only lead to further erosion of the credibility of the Primates’ Meeting and accentuate our failure to honour the work already done by them....This stance is in fact an expression of Global South Primates’ commitment to continue to be constructively and responsibly engaged in the apostolic life and witness of the global Anglican Communion.”

North American Anglicans have willfully decided to ignore religious practices that bind us to each other. It is because of their actions and unwillingness to honour mutually agreed upon commitments that I believe we are in such a crisis today. In Canada decisions have been made and actions taken independent of the larger Anglican family. So rather than being bound together, Canadian and American actions are breaking the bonds of commitment so necessary for healthy family interactions.

The fracturing caused by the actions of the Anglican Church of Canada and the Episcopal Church USA has resulted in the formation of the Anglican Church in North America and the Anglican Network in Canada. It is my belief that ACNA and ANiC needed to be established as alternate jurisdictions in order to address the crisis in relationships, ritual and religion currently existing in the North American Anglican family.

I believe that ACNA and ANiC are establishing healthy familial relationships, rituals and religion because there is a unity of theology and practice that no longer exist in the Anglican Church of Canada.

Let me share with you about my introduction to St. Augustine's sixteen and a half years ago. In the summer of 1994 I was interviewed to become your pastor. At my initial interview, I shared with the interviewing committee *The Montreal Declaration of Anglican Essentials*. This document had been finalized in June 1994 at a gathering in Montreal. It articulates the Essentials of the Faith; the non-negotiables. I said to the interview committee that I would intentionally shape the way I ministered among the people of St. Augustine's with the Anglican Essentials as document informing our life together. I also stated that I would give time to trying to influence the Anglican Church of Canada to embrace these essentials of the faith.

Sixteen and a half years later I believe St. Augustine's is a church community that has been positively influenced by the Montreal Declaration. However, I believe the Anglican Church of Canada is choosing to move farther away from essential Christian theology and ethics. It is because of this that there is such confusion with relationships, ritual and religion.

The Anglican Network in Canada on the other hand is a jurisdiction that has formally adopted the Montreal Declaration of Anglican Essentials as a foundational document.

As I stand before you today I want to say that I have not changed my position from the one held when interviewed all those years ago. Because of what I see as:

- i) The willful disregard to teaching a biblical view of God,
- ii) The redefinition rituals in ways that distort our identity
- iii) The ignoring of the religious practices that help to shape our life so we can live in trusting relationships

I have reached a decision.

Now let me say that the words I am about to speak have been considered with much thought and prayerfulness. Since September 12th I have struggled deeply with the question of what I should do because of the crisis within the Anglican Church of Canada. As recently as January 6th I thought I should stay within the Anglican Church of Canada. In fact I had written a paper which I only shared with the Corporation detailing why I believed this was what I was too do. But then with the invitation of Michael Ingham to our Diocese announced on January 11th I admitted that the problems existing in the larger Canadian Church are also at play here in Calgary in ways that are more serious than I had previously thought.

Therefore because of what I see as the crisis in relationships, ritual and religion within the Anglican Church of Canada and the Diocese of Calgary:

I have decided to become a priest licensed in the jurisdiction of the Anglican Network in Canada.

- This decision is consistent with what I have taught over the years I have been your rector.
- This decision allows me the opportunity to join with a larger church body that takes unity in essentials seriously.
- This is a decision that I believe most of all God is calling me to because I believe the Anglican Network in Canada as part of the Anglican Church of North America is more authentically Anglican in its relationships, ritual and religion.

When I read what is written on the ANiC website my heart resonates with joy because I see articulated there an biblically honouring Anglicanism committed to rituals and religion that deepen the bonds of familial affection and unity.

I can give my full consent to the statement of faith found there.

Anglican Network in Canada members believe in:

- i) *The supreme authority of the teaching of Holy Scripture as understood within the doctrinal formularies of historical Anglicanism, specifically, the Book of Common Prayer, the Thirty-nine Articles, the Ordinal and the Solemn Declaration of 1893.*
- ii) *The triune nature of the one God, and the personal divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ.*
- iii) *The sinfulness of each and every person and the universal need of salvation.*
- iv) *The sinless life, atoning death, bodily resurrection and ascension, heavenly reign and future return in glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.*
- v) *The essential realities of salvation encompassing the forgiveness of sins through justification, regeneration and adoption into the Father's family, union and communion with Jesus Christ and the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the practice of holiness, moral transformation into the image of Christ, and the future resurrection of the body for eternal life.*
- vi) *The preaching of the Word of God, the fellowship of the church, the ministry of the sacraments, and personal prayer – as the principal means of God's grace.*

I believe God is calling me to be part of a church that graciously and intentionally lives her life with this kind of theological unity. Therefore I am looking forward to becoming part of the Family of ACNA and ANiC as I continue to live my life as an Anglican Christian.

Conclusion:

In closing, I want to say this has been the most difficult decision I have ever had to make as a priest. I find the scene in the Fellowship of the Ring where Frodo says:

"I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened"

a clear expression of my heart. And yet I also remember what Gandalf said next:

"So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us."

I believe these are very troubled days in the Anglican Church of Canada and as I have considered deeply the problems we are facing I have now decided what to do with the time given to me, which is to come under the jurisdiction of the Anglican Church of North America and the Anglican Network in Canada.