

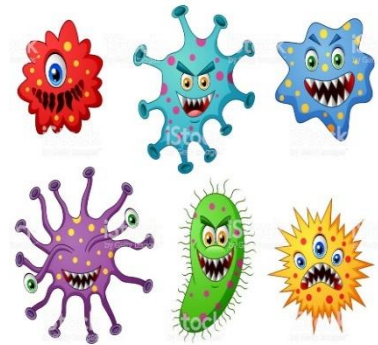


The Corona Chronicles

Reviewing the Church through a time of crisis

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Bishop Michael



Anglo-catholicism and renewing the Church

Corona, Christ and ministry:

There was a report in the Times commenting on the decision by Bishop Cottrell – the next Archbishop of York. He said that *volunteer chaplains would be banned from going on wards or near patients, including those not displaying symptoms of Covid-19.* This struck me as an odd to be coming down from a Bishop, especially in the light of clergy during previous pandemics such as the great plague. He went on to say *that clergy who wished to volunteer to help the Nightingale should think instead about how they could support NHS staff in other ways, suggesting that they might wish to go shopping for them.* Not surprisingly, this did not sit well with clergy in the diocese. The new Nightingale Hospital is located in the Diocese. *The clergy have been also been told that they may not enter their churches, even on their own, to pray and stream services online over Easter.* Eleven clergy had volunteered to assist the two fulltime chaplains working between five of the London hospitals (one third of all Coronavirus patients are being treated in London) but were told “no”. The lead chaplain at the Croydon University Hospital commented... *providing God’s grace in all situations, regardless of risk, was “the calling that Christ gave [chaplains] and our Christian responsibility”.* The reply from the Archbishop’s Council offered little encouragement for those wanting to provide pastoral care to the dying... *We are grateful for the self-sacrifice offered but the last thing we want is to put burdens on the health service. There are many other things volunteers can do, such as bereavement counselling.*

I cannot help but wonder what that says to the world about the Church, ministry and caring for the dying? My understanding of the Church in previous times of crisis was that they were in the forefront of care, even to the point of dying in ministry. In terrible times when the country was being ravaged by highly contagious diseases such as Black Death, plague and cholera, the Church was in the frontlines ministering in the name of Christ bringing Gospel peace and forgiveness to the dying. In dark times, this ministry was one of the few *lights shining in the darkness.* Note how this is an Anglican Church decision. Other denominations have continued to minister, all taking appropriate precautions.

One thing I find particularly galling is that during our rite of ordination of a priest, the Bishop tells the ordained how they are *to minister to the sick and prepare the dying for their death*. Now, because there is an element of personal risk involved, they are told to abandon the sick and the dying. Is it any wonder the people of the world look on and wonder about whether or not our Church leaders really do believe. Have they turned dioceses and parishes, bishops and priests into administrative centres and administrators to the point pastoral care, mission and ministry now sit somewhere down the list of priorities?

Rise up you Anglo-Catholics in faithful disobedience!

This is one of those rare occasions I would be likely to ignore such a directive from the Bishop. It would be first of all on the grounds that no Bishop has the authority to decide I am not to fulfil my priestly ministry. Secondly, **James** makes it clear in his letter... *Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.* ¹⁵ *The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven (5:14-15)*. This is a fundamental biblical expectation.

One of the core features of Anglo-Catholicism is the link the early movement made between the priesthood of Christ and the ordained priest. This is one of the reasons they maintain the word *priest*. Christ is the full and perfect priest and the Church is the Body of Christ. All ministry coming from Christ, through the mediation of his Body is going to be priestly ministry because it is done in Christ (this is worth pondering).

One of the principles on which our ministry grows is the belief in the sacredness of all human life. When we look at people we see before us not only men and women made in the image and likeness of God but brothers and sisters of Christ in whose family we are drawn through the sacrament of baptism. This is why, from the beginning, Christians have stood out within the wider society. They are known for their compassion, their ongoing prayers for all who suffer and their intimate engagement with those in need of any kind. They lived in the world as Christ lived in the world and the bar for human relationships was the model of Jesus' own social interactions.

The significance of the Incarnation on ministry

One of the first Anglican works I read was the theology of F.D.Maurice and I found myself excited by the way he understood some of the implications arising out of our belief in the incarnation. When Christ *became man and made his home among us* he

entered into the state of the lowest beggar, of the poorest, stupidest, wickedest wretch upon whom the Philosopher and the Pharisees trample. Further he wrote how Christ became a man in order that he might redeem the humanity which the Philosophers, Pharisees, beggars and harlots share together. Any notion of a separation of the sick, the poor, outcasts and those dying of the Coronavirus would have been anathema to him, as it is to Christ himself. Christ laid hands on the lepers, engaged with the unclean Samaritan women, touched the woman with a discharge and sacrificed all he had and all he was for the sake of all humanity.

For him, it was the poor who bore the image of the Saviour. So clear was this link that it was possible to see the parable of the **Last Judgment in Matthew 25** coming to bear in on all pastoral ministry...*whatever you fail to do to these the least and most needy of my children, you refuse to do to me (a slight tweaking of the Greed).* There is no get-out clause there, no exceptions in the case of Coronavirus. In one work Maurice quotes a sermon delivered by Pusey where the great preacher declared that *God had made the poor the visible representatives to the rich of his Only Begotten Son...the poor are the hands of God.*

One of the theological imperatives for Pusey was that the incarnation brought with it a serious responsibility for *servicing Christ in the flesh of his children.* This was seen a part of the DNA of the ministry of those first Anglo-Catholics. It was not all about beautiful liturgies and high christologies. They lived with an appreciation of the works of God unfolding everywhere in our world, being a part of a universe that sings the glory of God.

History is replete with examples of this coming alive in the witness of endless clergy and laypeople within the Anglo-Catholic tradition. The most popular of these has been the ministry of the Victorian *slum priests.* They were consciously non-political, but this does not exclude the fact that some were quite reactionary. In today's complex political world, with various strains of nationalism and materialism making Christ's message as difficult to preach as it was during the era of the Roman Empire, Anglo-catholics have an opportunity like no other. There is not going to be an earthly, political, economic or military solution to the world's woes. Sin abounds and the world is yet to embrace the gifts of Easter. This is the world in need of a profoundly biblical witness to what is foundational to all Anglo-Catholics: the suffering of the poor is the suffering of Christ.

The Church must both raise its voice in protest and its arm in protection, charity, mercy and love, opening its doors and its resources for the comfort of those who are afflicted in any way. In the theology I absorbed and experienced growing up in Franciscan spirituality, these things become the sacrament of our engagement with the world. They

point to our inner-Christ. It has to be the way of life defining us much more than vestments, liturgies, buildings, organs and the like. The core of our vocation within the catholic tradition is the embodying of the love God has for all men and women, particularly the suffering little ones of the Lord God...*enfleshing the God who takes on flesh, its central act of adoration and transformation is the Eucharist (Tennyson).*

Is this not a key part of our demise, that we have lost this passion for the poor? We have begun to doubt the Gospel in the face of a world growing more belligerent in its unbelief? Faced with the attractive and seemingly all-powerful forces of science, medicine and technology and forced to deal with generations who know nothing of Christ, we have stumbled, doubted and turned to an insistence on the authority of the Church and the mystery of the liturgy. We are faced with two choices: *1.* Retreat into the seductive world of the ethereal and the irrelevant or *2.* take up the much more demanding and difficult vocation of embodying Christ in the world.

We do not have “slum parishes” in the style of those addressed by Pusey and his followers but we surely have their equivalents all around us. Engaging in these does not in any way mean a watering down of our rich and valuable liturgical and theological frameworks on which we have built tradition. These traditions grew out of that slum setting and were a part of the catholic response to the situation of the poor and the suffering. It was in the docks we have the first examples of a daily Eucharist being celebrated (St Peter’s Plymouth) – ironically for 2020 it was during the great cholera epidemic. It was seen as an essential way of strengthening and empowering the workers for their daily routines. Another inspiring example of this link between theology and pastoral care can be found in the parish of St Saviour’s Leeds. The clergy would place the medical supplies and medicines on the altar during the morning eucharist and then take them out to minister to the sick and the dying in the town, many of whom perished despite this service.

It is impossible not to sit back and be in awe of the audaciousness of these priests, the religious sisters and the laity who were prepared to enter into the jaws of darkness in order to be Christ to them and Christ with them. Some of these same men and women spawned the movement of the first Anglican missionaries into PNG, some of whom formed the body of saints and martyrs we celebrate at the Martyrs of Papua New Guinea. They took their thuribles, vestments, eucharistic devotions, confession, anointing along with their charity, compassion and commitment to Christ into these places that Christ may be known – whatever the cost...*the poor must be brought the ministry of Christ, in the celebration of the sacraments and the preaching of the Gospel.*

Newman understood that the catholic movement emerged as a movement for the renewal of the Church, for a return to the fundamentals espoused by the Church in the New Testament. It arose out of genuine evangelicalism. It was based on a very concrete understanding of the realities of parish life, on what life was like among the true poor and those on the margins of the booming industrial societies.

The contemporary world in need of a renewal of the catholic

Those early catholic reformers remind us of the dark sides of utilitarianism. They were strongly against what in our world is a rampant consumerism and if around today would have railed against multi-nationalism and the way our cities create the soulless urban monsters we are building on the fringes of our major cities and towns. They had the advantage of still being able to relate to earlier monastic practices of a practical and charitable service of the poor. They promoted the significance of Sunday rest, the family and stood between the powerless and those of the political elite who were inclined to let the market place shape the way people lived and died, who were indifferent to the suffering their decisions inflicted on those outside of their social circles.

One model for today is the manner in which they brought alive the whole notion of living in parishes that were sacramental communities. This formed these faith communities into centres for social outreach and gospel engagement with the poor and those who were subjected to discrimination at all kinds of levels. Parishes could do what the larger political groups, local government structures and national leadership could not manage. Parishes were among the people and were perfect opportunities for mobilising the population in achieving Kingdom priorities.

The real catholic theology driving them was their profound faith in the enduring presence of the incarnate Son of God in all they did. This was a God to be obeyed, glorified and witnessed to in the world. They did not separate their “High-Church” liturgies and sacramental ministries from their commitment to the service of the poor. One went with the other. This is what gave legitimacy to the Oxford Movement. How sad it is today that these opposite sides of the same coin have now been separated off – liturgy/sacraments on the one hand and ministry with sacrifice to the poor on the other. Catholic clergy and particularly catholic bishops, by and large, have allowed themselves to be pushed into little fortresses of irrelevancy because of this separation of what was never to be separated.

Anglicans have been badly served in the past by the way this separation has been allowed to develop so that catholics are now more spoken of more in terms of vestments and liturgy than their incarnational theology leading to a oneness with the poor. If the beretta wearing clergy were as scrupulous in their willingness to sacrifice for the poor as they were with raising their berettas in the liturgy, our Church would be thriving. Equally, if those who claimed a catholic heritage but understand that to mean wearing vestments and having “high” liturgies had been more focussed on what the Bible and our apostolic traditions demanded of us, our Church would be alive.

But we have been badly served by our leaders, by bishops and clergy who have been more content on being popular, on being “relevant”, pushing their personal agendas and bandwagons and inclined to adopt the morals and philosophies of the contemporary world than in remaining steadfast to the principles of catholic mission and ministry. Too many are disinclined take on the constant daily grind of pastoral work; see priestly ministry as an income source and spend more time in administration than being out in the “trenches” where the people they are called upon to serve weep and bleed.

now is the acceptable time! now is the day of salvation!...(2 Cor 6:2)

- How do our own parishes in the catholic tradition measure up to our heritage?
- The world is in need of faith communities able to lift them into the mystical and at the same time engage them in their earthly realities. It involves offering them best of all in liturgical celebrations and sacraments and at the same time the most compassionate of social engagement. Are we willing to take this call to renewal?
- What can we learn from the experiences and methods of the slum priests that might guide our own efforts in renewal?
- Those early Anglo-catholic communities celebrated the importance of the parish as a locus for renewal. In what ways might we be able to link the catholic parish to the struggling peoples in whose midst we are called to serve.
- The catholic tradition is not about the primacy of the priest in pastoral ministry. It is built on an understanding of the whole of the parish, ordained and laity alike sharing a common baptismal ministry in the transformation of the world through being Christ’s image and likeness to all. All shared in God’s mission in the world. How might we better promote, honour, encourage and support a full range of lay ministries in our parish that we can celebrate better and more meaningful liturgies and more fully engage with God’s poor little ones?