

**THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY'S ADVENT LETTER
AND
THE CONSECRATION OF MARK LAWRENCE AS BISHOP OF SOUTH CAROLINA**

by

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"If only the good were clever,
And only the clever were good,
This world would be so much better,
Than ever we thought it could.
But the good are seldom clever,
And the clever are hardly good;
The good are so rude to the clever,
And the clever so harsh to the good."

– Anonymous

“The peace of God, it is no peace,
But strife closed in the sod.
Yet, brothers, pray but for one thing –
The marvelous peace of God.”

– W. A. Percy (1885-1942)

I

That most prolific of authors, Anonymous, nailed the human condition as it so often expresses itself amidst the deceptively dreaming spires of Oxford in the U. K., and Sewanee in the U.S., where his (or her?) ditty about the good and the clever has been passed down from generation to generation.

In Sewanee's case, a more profound expression of another perspective on the same truth, that of the cross of Christ, is regularly sung in the University Chapel as penned by the late William Alexander Percy (one of Sewanee's sons) and as found in the hymnal of The Episcopal Church.

Both texts could surely be adapted and applied to the “crisis” (as the Archbishop of Canterbury has called it) afflicting the Anglican Communion. It is a crisis in which all-too-human polarization has led to the present stand-off, but the cross provides a way forward.

In the months since the very nearly unanimous re-election of the Very Reverend Mark Lawrence as Bishop-designate of South Carolina, polarization has continued apace. But Dr Williams's Advent Letter (see www.stlukeandstpaul.org) now points us towards resurrection.

It should not come as a surprise to Christians of any stripe that the way to resurrection is always and only through the cross. One of Dr Williams's predecessors, the late Michael Ramsey (100th Archbishop of Canterbury), had to go out of his way, however, to bring the point home to Anglicans in the 1930s by

alluding to an even deeper crisis of faith at that time for many Christians in Europe. The church, Archbishop Ramsey wrote (in *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*) "... is full of tribulation since, whether it be faithful or faithless, it is always the meeting-place between sinful man and the love and judgment of God."

Dr Ramsey went on to quote Karl Barth, whose resolute witness in the face of so many Christians' compromise with the Nazis reflected this penetrating affirmation in his great book on *Romans*: "The church suffers from many well-known human failings, which are not difficult to discover and expose ... yet it is unprofitable for us even to speak of these exposures except in the context of the veritable tribulation of the church – a tribulation lying far deeper than this or that corruption, however corrupt it be, which men suppose they can remove ... The tribulation of the church is simply the expression in time of His glory, of His righteousness, of His will to help all men."

II

The arcane and process-oriented rules of our current Anglican game-playing can give the impression that, whatever the ups and downs and however convoluted the circling and turning and posturing, there never seems to emerge anything but a "déjà vu all over again" lack of consensus. Now at last, however, Dr Williams has laid out terms on which Lambeth 2008 might address and even answer the perennial questions about Anglicanism: What is it? Can it be saved? Is it worth it?

Among recently shifting fortunes in the state of play, Mark Lawrence's home diocese, San Joaquin, has voted overwhelmingly to make its own shift from The Episcopal Church in the U.S. to the Province of the Southern Cone of America, a shift welcomed and facilitated by the Southern Cone itself. While this institutional migration of San Joaquin is certainly an anomaly, it is just as certainly but one among many anomalies in the world of contemporary Anglicanism.

For that matter, anomalousness as such might ironically be called the genius – or daimon? – of the Anglican Way, dating not just from the Elizabethan Settlement but from the immemorial mists of that long-ago encounter between Celtic and Roman Christianity.

Whereas the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the U.S. and her litigious Chancellor seem to have staked their claim – indeed their exercise of hegemony – on a kind of canonical fundamentalism, the Archbishop's Advent Letter upholds a quite different ecclesiology.

Dr Williams writes: "The Communion is a voluntary association of provinces and dioceses; and so its unity depends not on a canon law that can be enforced but on the ability of each part of the family to recognise that other local churches have received the same faith from the apostles and are faithfully holding to it in loyalty to the One Lord incarnate who speaks in Scripture and bestows his grace in the sacraments. To put it in slightly different terms, local churches acknowledge the same 'constitutive elements' in one another. This means in turn that each local church receives from others and recognises in others the same good news and the same structure of ministry, and seeks to engage in mutual service for the sake of our common mission."

It is not, I hope, egotism on my part to read in Dr Williams's words an echo of a statement of my own last August: "Whether the Diocese of South Carolina is or is not part of The Episcopal Church is a matter of ecclesiological inconsequentiality. Anglicanism is re-aligning itself around relationships of

gospel witness, catholic order, and apostolic faithfulness among and between bishops and dioceses whose defining identity is not that of denominations – which, like all human institutions, wax and wane – but, rather, that of the divinely constituted One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ.”

III

When and where does push come to shove? Can the Archbishop of Canterbury see to it that those who come to Lambeth 2008 really address the question “whether or how far we can recognise the same Gospel and ministry” in one another? For with these words, Dr Williams, perhaps almost against his own inclination, has at last identified the biblical and doctrinal bottom line.

My own hope would be that the Primates and Provinces of the Global South will, on this basis, overcome their understandable scepticism (not least about “professionally facilitated conversations”!) and show up for Lambeth en masse. For it is now clear that even the pathetically uncertain trumpet of the New Orleans Statement by the U.S. House of Bishops is too much for many, if not most, American dioceses to heed. At a truly Communion-wide Lambeth, what the Reverend Dr. Paul Zahl has called the “ersatz Christianity” of the leadership of the U.S. Church would surely be exposed for what it is: a false gospel.

Notwithstanding the element of capriciousness about likely attendance or otherwise, Lambeth 2008 may provide the only opportunity available for the bishops of the Communion to commit to that “mutual recognisability” of faith and ministry which Dr Williams rightly claims as a sine qua non of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

It is on the basis of such mutual recognisability that the Diocese of South Carolina is moving ahead with the consecration of Mark Lawrence – a priest from the migratory Diocese of San Joaquin! – at the hands of Windsor-compliant bishops of The Episcopal Church, the Church of England, the Anglican Church of Canada, the Global South, and the Common Cause Partnership.

Fittingly enough, this consecration is scheduled to take place in the very venue, that of the Cathedral Church of St. Luke and St. Paul in South Carolina, where in 1999 another of Dr Williams’s predecessors, Archbishop George Carey, delivered his historic appeal to the Anglican Communion on “The Precious Gift of Unity” – an appeal more honored in the breach than the observance.

Our hope in South Carolina is that Mark Lawrence’s consecration, along with the present Archbishop of Canterbury’s willingness to follow his predecessor’s lead, will bear fruit at Lambeth 2008 in a clear and definitive affirmation, on the part of the vast majority of bishops present, that the Anglican Communion is (in Dr Williams’s words) “truly a gift of God to the wholeness of Christ’s Church.”

Only a Lambeth Conference – attended by as many as possible of those bishops invited – can ensure that such an affirmation is based on more than mere consensus about where the “boundaries” of gospel truth and catholic ministry lie and “why they matter for our witness to the world as well as for our own integrity and mutual respect.”