

**FORWARD IN FAITH
NATIONAL ASSEMBLY 2018**

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A very warm welcome to St Alban's today to all of you, and it's a special treat for me to have been asked to preach in my own church... so thank you, Bishop Tony, for the invitation! One of the things that occurred to me about this congregation is that, because you are all members of Forward in Faith, you all get *New Directions*. And that means that a fair few of you – maybe even most of you! – will have read my column at some point. I took it on from Fr Geoffrey Kirk some six and a half years ago now, and the title, *The Way we Live Now*, is the title of a book by Anthony Trollope. So some of you will know that I have written recently about the business of self-definition, and you can imagine my delight to have read on the BBC News website recently that (and I quote), 'Dutchman, 69, brings lawsuit to lower his age twenty years'. He wants the date changed on his birth certificate. He is, the BBC tells me, 'a media personality and motivational guru', who 'converted to Buddhism earlier this year'. He's taking the micky, isn't he? Isn't he? – I just don't know any more! Whatever will we do about those inconvenient things called 'facts', facts like 'Born 1949'? Well... I have my facts; you have yours.

Funny, isn't it, how we're the ones – we Christians – who are accused of making up 'facts'. And we've not helped ourselves. Theologians, bishops among them, spent years peddling the line that we needed to shed what they called the myths in order to be credible to the modern world: the miracles of healing, the nature miracles, the Virgin Birth, the Myth of God Incarnate. But the modern world is doing its own demythologising: sex, colour, age, and yes, despite the evidence of your eyes, I do in fact have a 32 inch waist. Professor Dawkins: they're coming for the evolutionary biologists next...

One thing the modern arch-liberal is very good at doing is framing the terms of the debate – and often generating the vocabulary too. So here's a challenge for us: can we (even at this stage) put ourselves in a position where *we* are the ones framing the terms of the debate? And the debate is not simply about the ordination of women. That's a manifestation of deeper questions, questions about what we believe about God and about the Church. Perhaps, if *we were* in a position to frame the debates of the future, our framework ought to be the familiar three-fold line of enquiry: 'Who is God? – Who is Jesus Christ? – What is the Church?' Or you might say, 'Is God? – How is God? – and Who am I in relation to God?'

Inside the Church, we spend (quite rightly) a lot of time talking about how God is, talking about God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, talking about the Person of Jesus Christ, the consequences of the Incarnation, the meaning of the Passion. We probably spend less time than we ought asking 'Who am I?', who are human beings in relation to the God whom we describe, and what, therefore, is the Church? Then outside church life, we probably spend most time responding to the question which we ourselves have already answered in the affirmative: 'Is God?', 'Does God exist?'

In other words, the questions you ask and how you ask the questions depends on context. For us

as a group, the question we need to keep asking to frame the debate is, ‘What is the Church?’ We’ve spent so much time responding to others over the last thirty years, explaining why we think something is problematic or uncatholic or impossible, that we’ve not given ourselves the chance to ask the questions in the way that makes sense to us. ‘What is the importance of our being human, and how do we live our lives in relationship with God?’ ‘What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou visitest him?’ And to answer *that* question, we must resist the pressure to conform to secularist views of what Christianity is and what the Church ought to be. Part of that process will be for us to slough off the restrictive critical method of the demythologisers which still hangs heavy round the neck of the Church of England, and ask how the account of Jesus in the New Testament is related to our experience of him as our risen Lord and Saviour today.

When the Church began to produce written accounts of the life of Christ, whose Body the Church is, she did so by drawing together lengthy accounts of the events of Holy Week – the mighty, salvific act of God which had brought the Church into existence – and adding accounts of earlier events which brought out the significance of that Great Week. And it is important for us to remember that the evangelists were not isolated believers: they, like us, are members of the Body of Christ, of the Church, who themselves were part of the gathered community on the first day of every week, for, as E.L. Mascall put it, ‘The Church’s life was maintained in existence as a continuing reality by the weekly celebration of the eucharistic mystery’ which Jesus himself ‘had commanded to be performed for his “recalling”, his *anamnesis*, and by which the salvific act was perpetuated in the Church’s midst with all its efficacy unimpaired’.¹ So we are emphatically not keeping alive a memory of events long ago in a kind of weekly remembrance Sunday; by what we are doing now, we are part of the continuing reality of the saving work of Jesus Christ.

I mention this – which we all know, for it is mother’s milk for Catholic Christians – because when we talk about the tradition of the Church, that tradition was liturgical (read Dom Gregory Dix) and theological (read Eric Mascall), then both of those intertwined strands fed into the later literary tradition that gave us the gospels and epistles of the New Testament. And that’s why the stakes are high when we talk about matters of Church Order. They are not in some kind of second division of Christian theology. They matter – *validity* matters – because *this*, this thing we’re doing now, matters, because it is the continuing reality of the saving work of Jesus Christ. We know Jesus just as truly as those who heard him preach the Sermon on the Mount, just as truly as those who walked with him on the road to Emmaus, because we know him in the Breaking of the Bread. That’s why it matters. So if we want to frame the debate, *here* is where we start, at the altar, as Christians always have. The question is the same for us as it was for the catechumens of the first generation: ‘Why is our life centred around a religious meal?’ And the Christian responds, ‘We do this in obedience to the command which the Lord Jesus gave on the night before he died; and now that he has risen from the dead this is where we meet him.’² The question, then, should never be, ‘What do we have to do to this Faith in order to make it credible to the modern world?’, but ‘How do we present this Faith to our contemporaries?’, as Mascall put it, ‘articulating in each place and time the Church’s consciousness which, while it is wonderfully and unpredictably responsive to the variety of situations in which it finds itself, is

¹ Mascall, *The Secularisation of Christianity*, p. 139.

² Mascall, *Jesus, Who He is and How we Know Him*, p. 34.

nevertheless continuous and identical throughout them all'.³ Our place, in other words, is to communicate, not to innovate.

Framing the debate is hard as we come up against a secular world which has a particular understanding of 'progress' and considers itself caught up in its current. 'I have long ceased to argue with people who prefer Thursday to Wednesday because it is Thursday', said G.K. Chesterton a century ago. It takes courage to challenge the terms of a debate, but we have every right to do so.

³ Ibid p36