



## Editorial

### On Living with Divine Presence and Manifest Fallibility in the Church in an Age of Empire

Bruce Kaye

Many years ago I stood in for a friend in his parish in Durham in the north of England while he was away on holiday. It was a small village just 25 km south-west of the city of Durham. We lived next door to Durham Cathedral and each day as I walked to work in the university, often taking a short cut through the cathedral, you could not escape the towering and powerful presence of that vast building. Leaving aside what was done in each of these buildings, they portrayed to me a visual parable of a temptation that has been perennially present to Anglicans, the temptation to imperial impulses in a religious tradition which began with localizing tendencies from both its Celtic origins and from Augustine's advice from Gregory the Great and has come in its profession to notions of dispersed authority among its people and its churches.

Standing alongside Durham cathedral the very stones cry out the power of the Norman church. What previous generations did not learn from those petrifying cries they could have learned from the visible presence of the Prince Bishops of Durham who combined overwhelming secular and ecclesiastical power.

There is an inscription on Prebends' Bridge facing up to the cathedral with a quotation from Sir Walter Scott which captures the church/castle image:

Grey towers of Durham  
Yet well I love thy mixed and massive piles  
Half church of God half castle 'gainst the Scot  
And long to roam these venerable aisles  
With records stored of deeds long since forgot.

This great edifice, almost isolated on its fortress-like promontory, at least to me did not speak with malign tones but rather exuded a protective presence. But then I was, through no fault or credit of my own, placed to view it from within. There was, of course, nothing about the cathedral building to suggest humility and engagement with the ordinary. It spoke most clearly of a powerful presence of the divine and his representatives. The divine and the representatives had certainly for centuries been masculine.

The 25 km drive to the south-west put me in a church of almost total contrast. St John's Escombe was a small Saxon church built in the seventh century around four hundred years earlier than the Norman cathedral. You could walk around it in less than two minutes. It sits at the bottom of the hill in the midst of the old village surrounded by small houses. It is one of the most complete Anglo Saxon churches in England. Much of the stone used to build it was taken from the remains of the abandoned Roman fort not far away at Binchester. Just after most of the work on the cathedral in Durham was finished they added a porch to St John's. Near the porch is a small sundial to mark the passing of the day. No great tower and bells to chime out the hours of the day and night or to toll the curfew of the evening as in the cathedral.

The cathedral stands tall and defensive, casting a controlling eye over the landscape and the lives that surround it, splendid in its Norman authority. St John's huddles in the village engaging with the land and the people in something like a Saxon snuggle. Of course the Saxons were not all snuggles, and in early Anglicanism it was the Celtic impulse that more pervasively enmeshed with the life of the people and the fabric of their culture.

The Norman cathedral with the castle at its gate had something to say about the majesty of God, even if it did so in a language coined from the brutal cross-channel invaders. The cathedral and the small St John's church point to a struggle that has occupied Anglicans from the earliest of times, but certainly most markedly since the coming of the Normans in the eleventh century. How are we to hold together a way of testifying to the majesty of God without corrupting that testimony by glossing our words of divinity with the tones of empire. We could call this the Norman/Saxon or imperial struggle in Anglicanism.

The Celtic song and the chorus of the small Saxon church speak of another aspect of this struggle, namely a testimony which is conscious of its own limitations, which sounds more like it belongs in the 'ordinary' of life and speaks out of a humility born of conscious fallibility and limitations. That song line has set the tone of that steady leitmotif in Anglicanism which we used to call providence.

We used to call it providence before we grew accustomed to thinking of God as a detached creator and so for day-to-day purposes more like a distant landlord. That eighteenth-century frame of reference is faltering in our day and we are again learning to sense divine providence in more intimate terms of God's gracious presence in the daily lives of Christians and of life of the church community.

There are two aspects of such a providence which are not only enduringly vital, but are especially significant in the community of churches in

the Anglican Communion who are currently embroiled fully in the Norman/Saxon temptations of our tradition. It is very easy to confuse the truth of something with our own opinion and further to imagine that this opinion, which, to encourage ourselves, we call 'the truth', is vital and central to the life of the church. In our day the truth that might be vital could well be about humility and how we are able to embrace the thought that those with whom we most fiercely disagree might have perceived something of the truth to which we are also aspiring. Testifying to the truth might be better served by getting out of the way so that the truth to which we are testifying can be better seen. But alas, the view from the towers of Durham cathedral seems so much more invigorating than the view from the paltry porch door in Escombe church, at least for those doing the viewing. Those being viewed are much more at hand and noticeable at Escombe than they are at Durham.

This visibility factor has another interesting effect. Because the other who is present with us in the church is closer and is a real person immediately at hand we are better able to see the ambiguities of their situation and may be helped by that also to see something of the ambiguities of our own circumstances. That ambiguity relates not just to the frailty of our own conduct and testimony, but to our perception of the divine, our vision of Christ, our reading of the scriptures, our openness in prayer. Looking from the top of the towers of Durham cathedral gives a less particular vision. It is on a larger scale and the lines can seem to be much more clearly drawn. Just so also with argument at a distance. It is easier to construe our knowledge of God and our vision of Christ as much more sharply defined and our knowing much more certain. But the greatness of the vision of God in Christ is more often seen in the particular and the immediate. Peter's experience of the overwhelming truth of the resurrection came not by a general view of the doctrine of God but from a personal experience of the particular.

These general issues are not new. In a variety of ways they are to be found at all sorts of times and occasions in the Anglican tradition. The imperial or Norman motif, or really it has been a temptation, carries with it a more sharp edged and defined epistemology. The local or Celtic/Saxon motif carries with it a more open and porous epistemology which in ecclesial terms means a more dispersed sense of authority.

This issue of the *Journal of Anglican Studies* well illustrates these perennial challenges in Anglicanism. Terry Brown sets the tone in his Conversation piece by challenging the grip of the hegemonic model of relations in the Anglican Communion. It is easy to imagine that media statements constitute a vital reality in the life of the church community even though only a tiny proportion of Anglicans around the world ever read or know

about them. It is clearly easier to see that truth in the periphery than in London, New York or Lagos, or indeed on the internet. Geoffrey Treloar looks at the way in which a quintessential Anglican trio of scholars encountered the new and threatening German critical scholarship of their generation. How to recognize the good and discern the unhelpful was their challenge. Robert Mac Swain draws us back to Austin Farrer and asks if perhaps he might provide a paradigm for the kind of Anglican scholar we need in our present times of stress.

John Painter weighs the biblical and early church material in the recent ARCIC document on Mary. This is one aspect of the document and no doubt there will be many other analyses which will claim our attention. But on the subject of Mary it is hard not to face the way the New Testament and early church material is treated in the document as necessarily foundational from any perspective. The various ARCIC groups have been models of that collegiality and generosity that are necessary to any dialogue and for this we owe them a great debt of gratitude. In our modern imperialist phase this collegiality and humility before the task given to them might turn out to be one of their most important contributions to our two church communities.

The last two articles in this issue need a little explanation. The Anglican Church in Australia has been going through a period of intense repentance on the issue of child protection. The church has turned around on how to respond to those among its members who abuse children, and how to care for and protect the vulnerable in the church. The fault in the church has been very great. The change taking place is very great. Australian Anglicans are not alone in having to address this issue, nor the issue which lies at the heart of so much of this particular problem, namely the abuse of power by people in the church who have been given authority in order to pursue a ministry of service and who have betrayed that stewardship.

The last meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council noted an Australian report on this matter and its recommendation that ACC establish a Safe Ministry Task Force to promote the physical, emotional and spiritual welfare and safety of all people, especially children, young people and vulnerable adults, within the member churches of the Anglican Communion. The recommendation was referred by the ACC to its Standing Committee for evaluation and to report on further action that might be taken. Garth Blake is a lawyer who has been deeply involved in this whole process. In his article in this issue of *JAS* he sets out in some detail what the Australian church has come to and it is here made available to the rest of the Communion. Duncan Reid has written a theological reflection on the issues involved.

These articles tell stories which truly speak to an enduring dilemma for Anglicans: How to express the presence of God in ways which faithfully point to the providence of God and also to our own failures in imagination. And how to hold together a way of testifying to the majesty of God without corrupting that testimony by glossing our own limited words of divinity with the tones of empire.