

“On the Road Passing Shiloh”

Introduction

Revd Ian Mobsby requested a paper on some work being done at St Barnabas Eltham (StB) for an academic symposium on Anglican Catholic (AngCath) modes of mission at Trinity House.

Eternity

Eternity is an Informal Evening Service introduced to StB on Sunday evenings at 6pm during 2015. Eternity has a number of distinctive ‘marks’ or features:

1. **Eternity is an additional service.** The Parish Eucharist continues to be celebrated at 0930 following a catholic shape. The Sunday Eucharist is the heart of the worship of the parish. There is cross-over between Eternity and the Eucharist, but there is no plan to change that priority.
2. **Eternity is ecumenical.** A group of Christians from StB, a local Roman Catholic Church (RC) of St Stephen and some free-church people have come together for Eternity. The initial goal of Eternity was to create a form that might attract local university students, but it seems to be changing form and widening in scope.
3. **Music is very important.** Each service begins with an extended period of praise led by musicians on rotation. Most of the music is modern, though at Christmas traditional songs were sung.
4. **The worship is hands free with images put on screen.** The worship is held in a side room with a group of about 15 people. There is a plan to change the church chancel to make it warmer and suitable for hands free worship.
5. **Contemplative Prayer is growing.** The forms of that prayer are experimental. The key element is silence, though visual arts are being employed with images thrown onto a screen.
6. **Eternity is a Church of England service** for legal purposes. The bishop has given permission under ecumenical canon B43 for leading and preaching from a variety of churches. In fact, there is not a great appetite for leading or preaching from non-Anglicans.
7. **Set in the context of hospitality** and begins and ends with a free café. Relatedly, this is a non-sacramental service, due to issues of church order that may arise. Several key participants are observant RC’s.

Eternity is at present very fragile. It is unclear what the future of this work may be; whether this is a temporary sign of the Kingdom of the kind pioneered by the Brothers of Taize, or the first stage in something more permanent.

Origins

Eternity has a number of points of origin.

History StB parish was created in 1919 to serve the new community of munitions workers at the Woolwich Arsenal housed on two estates put up by Woolwich Borough Council and the LCC. Throughout its history the church has mostly been AngCath in mission. In a creative step in the late 1970’s the then vicar, Revd Melville Lewis, started an Informal Evening Service, but it was discontinued in 1980. The present vicar feels this work is a continuation of the work in the 1970’s and that the LORD has been whispering a vision for Informal Worship down the years. Back in WW2 the then vicar, Revd Conrad Rogers, was also using experimental forms. His ministry appears to have been one of the most effective.

Evangelism beginning around 2009 there were a series of deaths of core people from StB in rapid succession plus some life-cycle changes, resulting in our USA dropping by about a third. I was looking around for an evangelism tool, and settled on Alpha, with the support of the PCC. About 80% of the adults went through Alpha. The first course was so popular it was oversubscribed and we had to arrange a second to follow immediately. This process led to a desire for university outreach to Greenwich University, some students reside in the parish as lodgers.

The HTB network of churches were helpful with advice. Then I discovered a plant at St Paul Shadwell in the East End. The Rector, Ric Thorpe (now Bishop Ric) was using Alpha run in a café, and a formula of a morning liturgical service and evening informal service. This work appeared relevant, because it was in a multi-faith and social class setting. I began to worship at SPS with Ric and began to discuss ideas.

Aggiornamento or 'opening up'. StB's eucharist had always had contemporary elements, but I wanted to introduce more spontaneity whilst retaining a catholic shape. The first stage was the introduction of more modern music, and Taize. There was a desire for less formality among many members of the church. We also ran healing services for about ten years. In retrospect I feel the introductory stage was essential to later developments.

Future

The Holy Spirit appears to be calling the group supporting Eternity to plant some form of service or outreach to a very difficult to reach area of the parish called Flintmill Crescent. Flintmill is a 1970's housing development of mostly social housing. It is hard to reach for topographical reasons. We are currently discerning this work by prayer, and the initiative is known as 'Shiloh' – 'place of peace' in Hebrew. [We cannot call it Flintmill due to gang issues and we want to avoid an ecclesiastical identity]. It is also interesting that the local free-church group are praying for and prayer walking Flintmill. This may be evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit through multiple independent attestation.

For his part, Revd Ian Mobsby has identified this as a Fresh Expression and is encouraging us to formalise matters under a simple rule. This may not be easy as some members of the group behind Eternity have been part of a RC neo-monastic community in Greenwich.

Some Theological Questions

Empirically it is clear, if we are to engage in initiatives such as Shiloh and Eternity the point will soon come when it is not possible for them all to be entirely serviced by clergy. This implies that there is an urgent need for the AngCath theology of lay engagement and empowerment to be re-considered.

To say that the church suffers clericalism is now a truism. Most groups within the church agree with that sentiment, indeed it is one of few points of agreement. I am not so sure, however. I feel clericalism is more symptom than cause. The underlying problem appears to be that Anglican Catholics (among others) have an inadequate theology of the Holy Spirit for the 21st century.

My own story is that I was a member of a venerable AngCath parish in Woolwich Area for 8 years. I learned much, but in that time I heard just one sermon about the Holy Spirit, by a Lay Reader which was quickly dismissed by the vicar. I understood the Holy Spirit as a mere codicil to prayer, observed occasionally at Pentecost and confirmations. I suspect many other catholic Anglicans are in a similar position to me.

This is evidence of an unbalanced Trinitarian theology, which makes place for the Holy Spirit, but which does not give the Spirit an equal place in preaching, prayer and devotion to the love shown to the Father and the Son, yet Anglican Catholic theology cherishes Trinitarian balance.

Relatedly, in Acts 8 we hear of the Samaritan church which had heard the gospel and received baptism in the name of Jesus Christ with water, but who had not heard of the Holy Spirit. Peter and John's action is to restore a Trinitarian balance by praying for the Holy Spirit in Samaria.

This Samaritan case has contemporary resonance. One legacy of the non-observance of confirmation by most of the baptised is that they are precisely in this 'Samaritan' situation. They have heard, perhaps inadequately, of Christ and received baptism with water, but have yet to receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit's indwelling. (Additionally, they are to use RC language often 'failing to make use of their baptism' and the benefits procured thereby).

If either of these theological points holds true the implication is that there is now need for a deeper consideration of pneumatology in catholic perspective to enable mission. Interestingly, similar work is being done ecumenically – is this multiple independent attestation?

- a. In the RC Church the current leader in this field is Fr Raneiro Canatalemessa, OFM Cap, Preacher to the Papal Household. He writes both serious academic and popular works. 'Sober Intoxication of the Spirit' is a good introductory text.
- b. St Mellitus are leading for the evangelical constituency and have produced 'The Holy Spirit in the World Today' (ed. Jane Williams) with contributions from Rowan Williams, David Ford and Jurgen Moltmann. An ultimately more devotional work is 'The Prodigal Spirit' produced by St Mellitus.
- c. Bishop Michael is aware of work done in the Orthodox and Pentecostal traditions on similar lines.
- d. The Church of England has produced 'Mission Shaped Spirituality' which is full of wisdom and quite sympathetic to AngCath perspectives.
- e. One potentially fruitful line of enquiry has been identified by UK Baptists, who see a tangency between the theology of the Holy Spirit and liberation. In particular, perceived from a minority ethnic perspective. My heart's desire is to see a similar theology for the traditional white working-class that brings transformation to every area of life. For me, this flows from the distinctive AngCath emphasis on incarnational mission and so is not a solely Evangelical priority.

Isaiah contains prophecy (44v26 and chapter 49) that that the Lord will restore the ruins of the city. This was precisely the work of the AngCath slum priests of the 19th century, whose spirit we need to recover today, but for new times and circumstances.

Calvin argued that pneumatological questions cannot be addressed in isolation, but are related to other questions, particularly in Christology. Perhaps there are specific questions for AngCath's to address? The areas that spring to mind are theology of mission, church order and sacraments?

Final Remarks

To conclude on a personal note, Fr Ken Leech believed that theology is a branch of spirituality. If so, in the end, the task is this – to listen carefully and obediently to the Holy Spirit. The first thing to ponder is – how can we do so most effectively?

Books

'Sober Intoxication of the Spirit – Filled with the Fullness of God' by Raniero Cantalamessa, ISBN 13; 978-0-86716-713-9.

'The Holy Spirit in the World Today' Edited Jane Williams, ISBN 978-1-905887-91-0.

'Mission Shaped Spirituality' Susan Hope ISBN 13; 978-0-7151-4080-2.

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