

Nashotah House Commencement Address

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“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations”

It is a privilege to be here on the festival day of St Jackson Kemper first missionary bishop of the Episcopal Church who reached beyond the traditional Episcopal constituency to go into the wilderness.

Nashotah House has an inspiring founder whom I particularly revere as someone who revived a primitive but always relevant style of episcopacy. In the early days of the Church in Anglo-Saxon England, Bishops were peripatetic church founders. In recent years I revived the dormant see of Islington as a missionary bishopric not in the vast spaces of the American North West but in the equally demanding mission field of contemporary London. Bishop Thorpe, the first bishop of Islington since the see was left vacant in the 1920's has been relieved of all committee and synodical duties to devote himself entirely to establishing 100 new worshipping communities in the Diocese by 2020. He faces the suspicions which surrounded Bishop Jackson Kemper and doubts about whether such an energetic missionary strategy could properly be described as “Anglican”. His energy and effectiveness is a rebuke to those large parts of the Church of England which regard decline as inevitable. By contrast I am convinced that the 21st century is a time of huge opportunity for the Church – a time of peril but also a time of promise.

1992, when I was consecrated the Bishop of Stepney in East London was also the year when the American sage Francis Fukuyama published his influential book *“The End of History”*. You will remember the thesis that with the advent of liberal democracy and market economics we have reached the consummation of the human project. “What we are witnessing,” Fukuyama wrote, “is not just the end of the cold war, or the passing of a particular period of post war history, but the end of history as such: that is the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”

Market economics, hailed as the engine of progress, were seen, in alliance with liberal democracy, as having put an end to the era of competing ideologies. “At the end of history,” Fukuyama argued, “it is not necessary that all societies become successful

liberal societies; merely that they end their ideological pretensions of representing different and higher forms of human society.”

Yet his vision has an elegiac quality to it. He describes the end of history as a “very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one’s life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle which called forth daring, courage, imagination and idealism will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands.”

There seems to me much that is still resonant about this picture of the present. Many people see the point we have reached in Western Societies as inevitable rather than as one of many possible choices, a state attained by struggle and a myriad of decisions. For many people there seems to be no alternative to the way we live now and for them the future has contracted to mere projections of current trends. There is no “adventus” – which in Christian thought stands for God’s future which is coming to meet us.

What of the Christian imagination and the meaning of the Church in such a world?

Some of the more reflective members of the diocesan team when I became Bishop of London more than twenty years ago had internalised the all but universal view of the new establishment in the media that the story of God could have only one end: relegation to the leisure sector, a harmless lifestyle choice appealing to those with antiquarian interests.

In its Christmas issue in 2000 the Millennium year *The Economist* published an obituary of God. In the words of the poet David Jones in “Anathemata” the greatest long poem of the twentieth century, we seemed to be “at the sagging end and chapter’s close” of the Church of England story in London.

Resources seemed to be in short supply to maintain the inheritance of the past. There was a large deficit in the Diocesan budget every year and we were chronically over-administered. There was a carousel of consultation which produced ideas in plenty and not a few “initiatives” but little energy was left over for implementation.

Growth springs from movements of the Holy Spirit, and from communities and individuals in whom there is life-giving sap. Bishops, Rectors and parish priests can do very little alone. They can seek to remove obstacles, and to make wise appointments. Pronouncements can usefully change an atmosphere, but too many “Diocesan initiatives” or vatic utterances from the vestry can be a distraction and contribute to

weariness and even cynicism, especially if it is suspected that the bishop or priest is trying to make a name for him or herself.

I am aware of the functional atheism of parts of the contemporary church and the contraction of the gospel to a vague therapeutic deism. But I simply do not believe that the Spirit who is the author of life is mere mould grown on the rock of economics.

Listening to authentically holy people, I have been taught that a change of world view reveals a new landscape and opened up fresh possibilities for action. Our period of decline was overshadowed by an institutional sense of weariness and scarcity. The substitution rooted in prayer of a more authentically Biblical view of the abundance of God's blessing and the abundance of the resources with which we have been entrusted was transformative.

One result was the quickening of the desire to stimulate vocations and to train ordinands in a prayerful context in which every legitimate strand of the apostolic tradition could be honoured. This led to perhaps the most significant development of the past twenty years in London: the establishment of St Mellitus College. I mention this especially because I see a similar awareness of the significance of an orthodox formation for ministry in your history and present reality.

Just as in the case of Nashotah House there was a growing dissatisfaction with how theology was being taught as a dull echo of the fashion dominant in the secular academy, as a subject like any other, which could be divorced from the life of the worshipping community.

Discerning which developments to bless and which to discourage demands a healthy but not uncritical love for how the Anglican Church has striven to communicate the gospel from generation to generation. I have always sought to balance active support for new ways of doing things with an emphatic advocacy of the tradition of the Church expressed in the Book of Common Prayer and the Authorised Version of the Bible.

Traditionalism is the obstinate adherence to the *mores* of the day before yesterday – the dead faith of living people. Tradition is the spirit-filled continuity of the Church's life, through which the truth is communicated from generation to generation in fresh ways in order to stay the same. Tradition is the living faith which we share with dead people. Actually often the hardest task is to persuade yesterday's *avant-garde* that they are today's busted flush.

The missionary situation in the 21st century is very different from that in the last century as seen through the eyes of Francis Fukuyama.

It is a time of promise but also peril with unchallengeable Western hegemony giving way to a genuinely multi-polar world in which the countries of the East are assuming the prominent position they have occupied for most of human history. The Astronomer Royal, Martin Rees recently published a book about the prospects for the human race worryingly entitled “Our Final Century” – without a question mark – although he has ascribed this to a publisher’s error. The same book was published in the US with the even more alarming title of “Our Final Hour”.

The question is shall we develop the wisdom to channel the power we have acquired from the scientific knowledge and discoveries of the 20th century? Where indeed, to quote T.S.Eliot, is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge and the knowledge we have lost in information.

Conscious of the challenge and the need for wisdom, today we celebrate the vision given to us in the risen Christ and attend to his command to “go into all the world”.

God so loved the world that he was generous and gave himself in the person of the Word made flesh. The blood given in his sacrifice was the foundation of a new community.

The entry into the new life is by the way of humility, powerfully symbolised in the Egyptian desert monastery where I was privileged to spend some time, by doors which were so low you had to stoop to enter. Growth in the community is tested by self-giving and especially maintaining good will towards one’s enemies and it is fed by our participation in the sign which pre-figures the end time – the Eucharist.

The community assembles like the wedding guests whom Jesus encountered at the marriage feast in Cana of Galilee. We believe ourselves to be the hosts, the masters of the feast, who have laid in adequate supplies for the celebration but unblessed bread and unhallowed wine go stale and sour and are soon exhausted unless they are referred to the author and giver of life.

In the responsible lives to which you are being called do not neglect thanksgiving and referring all that you have and are to God who so loved the world that he was generous. We are not the masters of the feast but guests. As we enter the story of the god-man in the Eucharist our story is irradiated by his story; the gifts we bring are received back as his gifts charged with a new potency and the capacity to knit us together as members one of another. We are given a deeper respect for the creation of which we are a part and whose well-being is intimately connected to our own. One of the priests of our Church, Thomas Traherne declared that “You never enjoy the world aright till the sea

itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens and crowned with the stars Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold and kings in sceptres, you never enjoy the world.”

I believe that we are being addressed in our generation by the glory and the distresses of the planet and all the dwellers upon earth. There is hope beyond the anxious complacency of the present. At the end of the Divine Comedy, the great poet of the Christian West, Dante, describes his vision of divine reality – “all the scattered leaves of the universe bound by love in one volume”.

Milton Friedman the American economist said to his fellow monetarists in their wilderness years in the 1970’s the following, “Only a crisis – actual or perceived - produces real change. When that crisis occurs the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That I believe is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.” That is a good description of what the Christian community ought to be in these times.

The plan of God which has been revealed in Jesus Christ points the way to the spiritual evolution of the whole human race. It is our privilege to have been called at such a crucial time to work in a century of promise and peril. The peril arises from godless arrogance, from power and knowledge divorced from wisdom or compassion. The Risen Christ is the promise. “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you and lo I am with you always to the close of the age.”