

Suffering for an evangelical faith

Peter C. Moore at NEAC, The National Evangelical Anglican Congress, Blackpool, England. 9/21/03

In July of 1998 ten statues of 20th. Century martyrs were unveiled over the West Front door of Westminster Abbey. When that happened the world re-learned an old truth that sincere faith often involves suffering. These martyrs, from every continent and many Christian denominations, with names like Martin Luther King, Janani Luwum, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Oscar Romero remind us that this past century was one of the bloodiest ever for those who have stood firm for the truths of our faith. Nor were their enemies only outside their churches. Bonhoeffer, to take one example, faced an overwhelming opposition from the bishops, theologians and clergy of his own church. But these men stood firm, and they paid the ultimate price.

The forgotten ones

Of course, these are men with names we all know. When I think of suffering Christians I have in my mind's eye an anonymous Chinese pastor, sitting as we speak in a forgotten jail cell in rural China, forced to do hard manual labor because he ran an unauthorized underground church. I think of the Angolan evangelist walking through the bush to reach a group of believers and stepping on a land mine. Today he walks with two prostheses for legs. He asked me if I could send him some fabric from America so that his wife would have something with which to make a dress. I think of the Sudanese woman, Christian mother of one of our students. She was apprehended in the night, tossed into the back of a truck, and later hacked to death – her body thrown in a ditch. I think of a Protestant seminarian in Mexico forced to watch the grim execution of an evangelist and the destruction of a Presbyterian church in of all places Cancun. As the Chiapas evangelicals lose jobs, land, homes, and in some cases life, this seminarian decided the ministry was not for him. And we all know that these stories could be multiplied thousands of times over.

So, what am I doing here speaking to you about suffering for the evangelical faith? What do I know about suffering compared to these?

By any standards of measurement I am privileged, comfortable, secure, and as the string of degrees after my name indicates educated well beyond my intelligence. I have money in the bank, even a beat up old sports car in the garage at home. My wife doesn't have to work. I grew up in the affluent suburbs of New York, got a scholarship to an elite private school, went to an Ivy league university, have a degree from Oxford, and – though I need to say it *sotto voce* these days – was baptized and cradled from birth in that bosom of the religious establishment, the Episcopal Church. What can I possibly say about suffering that can hold a candle to what so many others can tell you?

A significant handicap

I do, however, have one significant handicap. Because of it I am branded as an untouchable in some circles. I am treated with polite disdain and occasionally castigated as ignorant, bigoted, intolerant, homophobic, simplistic – and even dangerous. Three times when I have spoken in public I thought graciously and sanely I have had to have bodyguards. In certain circles I notice at social occasions I must initiate every conversation, and especially within certain parts of the Church the institutions with which I am identified are held in virtual contempt by people in positions of authority. My handicap? I am an evangelical.

In American Anglicanism we are not afflicted with the tribalism that the editors of *Fanning the Flame* describe in Britain. I suppose we have some who would identify themselves as “open” evangelicals, a few as “liberal” evangelicals, others as “charismatic” or “conservative” or “mainstream.” But basically we are just Gospel people and Bible people to quote a noted British Evangelical from a former NEAC that I attended. Most of us have something of all these streams within us.

Evangelical is a dirty word in American Episcopal circles – at least when it means something other than old Virginia low churchmanship with its fondness for Morning Prayer. And to be described as a “British evangelical” puts you just about on the bottom rung of the ladder.

The death and rebirth of Anglican Evangelicalism in America

You see, about 130 years ago, with the split of the Reformed Episcopalians over ritualistic issues, evangelicalism began to die out in the Episcopal Church. By the early 20th. Century it was relegated to a few rural outposts and a quaint, fiery evangelist who preached hell and damnation to the stockbrokers on Wall Street wearing his clerical collar. What had once been a thriving 19th. Century stream of Episcopal evangelicals became a tiny trickle, and in most people’s minds “Episcopal evangelical” was an oxymoron.

But thanks to the Post World War II revival of Anglican evangelicalism in Great Britain, American Anglican evangelicalism was reborn. Visits by John Stott, J. I. Packer, Philip Hughes, and Stuart Barton-Babbage were the pilot light that later ignited the flame. That flame was fueled by the Billy Graham Crusades which penetrated through the walls of our lovely neo-Gothic Episcopal churches to reach the upper classes. Later it was greatly enhanced by the Charismatic Movement; and since those days it has been nurtured by small groups, Crusillo, Alpha, and a host of para-church movements that crisscross all the major denominations. Now in nearly every major metropolitan area in the country you can find an Episcopal Church where the Gospel is preached with clarity and conviction. And it is these churches that are growing and alive.

In the midst of this awakening, and to serve the emerging leadership, Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry was born – on a wing and a prayer! Bishop Alfred Stanway came out

of retirement in Australia to be our first Dean, bringing the practical spirituality and mission-mindedness of his Tanzanian CMS experience with him. And so it was that Evangelicalism in the American Episcopal Church had a new center for training. We are one of the eleven Episcopal seminaries, and the only one that is evangelical – though Nashotah House, a traditional High Church seminary now has a dean and several faculty who were nurtured at Trinity. So we have two orthodox seminaries, one high church and the other evangelical – in friendly partnership – though Trinity is significantly larger. In fact, in 27 years Trinity has become the largest of all the eleven seminaries in terms of total headcount, and the 3rd. largest in Master of Divinity candidates.

The inner struggle

But many of you know all this. It's the inner struggle, the spiritual battle (warfare if you will) for the soul of the Episcopal Church that has left us with scars and wounds. And it is that struggle, I suppose, that gives me the right to speak to you of suffering for the Gospel.

How does this struggle express itself? There has not been physical persecution – yet. But there have been threats. When the celebrated American poet Carl Sandberg was asked “What is the ugliest word in the English language?” he thought for a moment and then said: “The ugliest word in the English language is – exclusive.” I would say that that is the primary way our struggle is expressed -- the sense of exclusion.

I see it through the eyes of seminarians to come to us after battles with diocesan bishops and Commissions on Ministry. Many have been told that they are too biblical for the Episcopal Church and should look elsewhere, although they would fit perfectly with any of your evangelical theological colleges and be totally at home here at this Congress. Large numbers have been forbidden to come to Trinity. “Over my dead body” said one bishop! Roughly 2/3 of our students, then, come without episcopal support – and must find a bishop along the way. Nevertheless they come, risking financial loss, debt, and living with the uncertainty of whether they will be ordained at the end. Of course, many bishops will not ordain our graduates, nor let them serve in their dioceses.

Evangelicals who attend the other seminaries are often treated to a barrage of stereotyping– evangelicals like to clap and sing “Blessed Assurance” they are told! They lack scholarship, and so on. One transferred to us after having been hit on by a gay faculty member at a sister seminary. There was, of course, no reprimand of that faculty member. That seminary lost a good student, and we gained one. Another student transferred to us after being told that no evangelical Episcopal scholar would ever be allowed to speak at the Episcopal seminary he was attending. Evangelical students are nearly always marginalized and occasionally ridiculed at our sister seminaries.

Then, once getting through this gauntlet, and finally ordained and out in parishes the marginalization continues – and in some ways gets worse. Preferment is frequently denied to evangelical clergy – although many come in under the radar, and end up in

large and significant parishes. After all, in a Church that has lost a million members, someone with vitality and conviction is a hot commodity.

But, as rectors of parishes, once signs of life appear, and parish leadership begins to shift to those with solid faith and a desire to grow and reach out, conflicts emerge. Since so few Episcopalians have even a modicum of knowledge of the Bible, the Gospel that Evangelical rectors preach sounds “Baptist” to untutored ears. Soon they are caught in a tug-of-war between renewed believers and old guard traditionalists. If the bishop is brought in, he or she may not understand the issues, and may side with those who seem most likely to “keep the institution going.” In some cases liberal bishops get downright nasty. The opposition to orthodox and biblical rectors can have the appearance of an inquisition, and the level of animosity towards orthodox faith and preaching would astonish you. Maintenance wins out over mission, and a good evangelical rector loses his or her cure, and leaves with a great amount of pain. [I am not implying that orthodox rectors always act with perfect wisdom or balance.]

There is, of course, no parity of appointments to diocesan and national committees. So evangelicals are regularly underrepresented. Evangelicals are misrepresented – and occasionally libeled – in the Church press. It would seem that the graders of the General Ordination Exams are biased in a liberal direction in the way they grade tests. There is limited access to mainline Episcopal publishing houses. I went into the bookstore at the Episcopal Church Center in New York City and scanned the shelves of books on sexuality. I noticed that there was not one book defending the orthodox, biblical view of sexuality. (I am told that has since been rectified!)

Need I go on? There are slights, rebuffs, subtle rejections, misunderstandings, exclusions, caricatures – and when evangelicals succeed, when their churches grow and flourish, they are overlooked. But I suspect that many of you know this from your own experience, though by sheer force of numbers, and because of strong leadership and uninterrupted continuity, your British and our American scenes are vastly different. In North America, the liberal element is in total control of the church’s inner working, and evangelicals exist at their mercy.

The real pain

But you know for me the biggest pain comes not from being excluded, but when I am included. It’s when I have to listen to impossible pap from supposed religious authorities in the name of the Gospel that has transformed our lives and which I know to be the greatest News the world has ever heard, that my heart sinks. It is the pervasive nominalism, the anti-intellectual mysticism, the arrogant elitism, the lifeless formalism, the post-Modern relativism, all coupled with – yes, I am ashamed to say it, that American sense of superiority that we and we alone are the true Anglicans, that the rest of the Communion can stew in its own juice – that is the greatest pain we bear.

The sexuality wars are only the top of the iceberg – though it is worth remembering that it was that part of the iceberg that was pretty near the surface that sunk the Titanic! Most

of our private secondary schools, including the great Episcopal boarding schools, have openly gay faculty. Our colleges and universities are nearly all sexually pluriform. Many companies and organizations provide benefits for same-sex partners. The media, including journalists and of course the entertainment industry wear the lavender triangle to signify their gay-friendly bias. One state, and now one Canadian province, officially recognize same-sex relationships and register them as couples. So why shouldn't the church follow suit?

You know the answer, and so do I, but many of our bishops and delegates to General Convention do not. And so we have our present crisis.

Luther on suffering as a mark of the church

But why should we be surprised at all this? Luther said that suffering was one of the seven marks of the church. In addition to the Bible, baptism, holy communion, absolution, ordination, prayer and worship there was what he called "the sacred cross" – by which he meant the endurance of "every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world and the flesh...by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness [all of which are sent] in order [for us] to become like [our]head Christ." The Augsburg Confession speaks of "the amazing, privileged apostolic succession of blood."

If we had time we might speculate on why Luther and his successors held on to the suffering nature of the true church, while Anglicans forgot it, or at least omitted to mention it. In none of the Articles of Religion in their earlier forms or in their 1563 form there is no mention of suffering as part of the church. This omission was surely not because Luther suffered more than the Anglican Reformers. If anything, it was the other way around.

Was it that the English Reformation was more gradual than the more catastrophic Continental one? Was it because Luther had a kind of boldness that contrasted with Cranmer's (understandable) vacillation? Or was it because Luther had a clearer understanding of the line of separation between church and state, whereas Cranmer's Erastianism led him to believe that a Christian prince, given the right use of holy scripture, could govern his kingdom correctly? (cf. Diarmaid MacCullough, *Thomas Cranmer*, Yale, 1996, p.280) Or was it because Luther had a dimmer, more Augustinian, view of the human will, while the English church was too influenced by Pelagius's optimistic view of the unfallen nature of the human will?

Learning from the newer churches

It is from the newer churches, that have not grown up in a post-Christendom society, that we are re-learning this forgotten part of our heritage – and hence are re-reading Scripture through blood-stained lenses. Some of the most poignant comments on the church's call to suffer interestingly come from ++Desmond Tutu, writing a number of years ago of the suffering of Christians under apartheid. He said:

“Jesus declares (that) the attitude of the world and its authorities will help to determine his true followers. That treatment will be one of the criteria to help distinguish the true from the false Church. (John 15:18-21). Consequently, we must not be taken aback at suffering and persecution which come our way. [As Shylock in the Merchant of Venice said of Jews] “suffering is the badge of all our tribe.” “If this is so,” says Tutu, “then it must mean that surprise must be occasioned for the Christian not by suffering and persecution but by their absence. A Christian or a church that does not suffer is a contradiction in terms.” (Walter Buhlmann, “The Church as Institution in the Context of Persecution”, *Martyrdom Today*, Metz/Schillebeeckx, Concilium, 1983, p.64)

Three images of the church

I am led to ponder three images of the church that those of us in the settled West tend to forget.

First, the image of the pilgrim. Our forebears grew up on *Pilgrim's Progress*. African American slaves grew up singing spirituals about “I’m just a pilgrim, wanderin through.” The Israelites, once settled and prosperous in the land, were to bring their offerings and say: “A wandering Aramaean was my father.” That’s how they were to remember Jacob’s lonely journey to Padan-aram, and the wilderness experience as a whole. (Deut. 26:5) “Here we have no continuing city,” says the book of Hebrews (13:14) – something of which the more than 14 million displaced persons around the world have no need to be reminded. But we do, and the church as a pilgrim people is an image that should burn itself in our minds.

Second, the image of the exile. With this we must couple the image of the remnant. “We are called to be a suffering remnant” within a church that is pursuing a path away from her Lord, said one of our orthodox bishops in America recently (+Andrew Fairfield). “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? Asked the Psalmist in Babylon. That is our cry, not just as Christians in an increasingly secular society, but as evangelical believers within our own respective churches. One of our Episcopal theologians says that “the calling of exile may be the future of us all.” “Too often, Christianity has been under girded by expectations similar to Davidic Judah... We have allowed our comforts and status as Episcopalians to become what the Temple of the Lord was for Jerusalem, ... our apostolic succession has become what the Davidic monarchy became even as Babylon was laying siege to it.” “We may now be on the brink of a great and almost unthinkable shift of Christian history on its axis, as great and unthinkable as the exile was for Judah. (Allen Guelzo, in “A Theology of Exile”)

And, third, the image of the ark. There is something terribly vulnerable about that ark, despite its relatively great size. It was not on a journey. It had no port of destination, and there was nowhere to land. It was adrift. We used to say, when talking about church conflicts: “In the ark, if it weren’t for the storm outside, you couldn’t stand the stench inside.” But now we’re much more conscious of the storm, and the ark is more like one of those Roll-on/Roll-off ferries, where the hatch has been left open and the stormy sea

has swept in, and we are awash with the turbulence that can topple us like dingy in a typhoon. Recently a lawyer from Kansas, who is an Episcopal activist who supports the Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire, pleaded with evangelicals “not to leave us.” “We’re not sure we’re right,” he says, “and we need you to walk with us through this.” Not sure, indeed.

Each of these three images has within it an element of yearning, of painful waiting, of loneliness, and of crying out to God. But they all speak of hope. On the other side of the pain there is the hope of arrival, of return, or safety, and of comfort. “Comfort yes, comfort My people! says your God. Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” (Isa. 40:1-3, NKJV)

And so, in sum, I conclude with three great realities. First, suffering for the Gospel is to be expected. Secondly, without suffering we might not know ourselves to be the Lord’s own. And thirdly, our suffering is not worth comparing to the joy that will be ours.

Visiting +Ben Kwashi, one of our doctoral students who is Bishop of Jos, Nigeria, and a close friend and colleague of my brother Bishop Josiah (Fearon), I noticed a curious Plexiglas box mounted on his living room wall. In it was a cross, some small objects, and a pile of dust. “What is that?” I asked. “Oh,” he said jovially, “that’s my coffin. You see the Muslims burned our house down a while back, and they thought we were in it. But we escaped out the back door. I keep that here to remind me that my life is expendable for Christ.”

It has made me think of John Donne’s poem on losing the cross:

Since Christ embraced the Cross itself, dare I
His image, the image of his Cross deny?
Would I have profit by the sacrifice,
And dare the chosen altar to despise?
It bore all other sins, but is it fit
That it should bear the sin of scorning it?
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From me no pulpit, nor misgrounded law,
Nor scandal taken, shall this Cross withdraw.
It shall not, for it cannot; for the loss
Of this Cross were to me another Cross;
Better were worse, for no affliction,
No Cross is so extreme, as to have none.
(1573-1631)