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An Evangelical in Norwich

By Justin K.H. Tse

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When Justin Welby was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, he launched a pilgrimage that he called “Journey in Prayer.” He began by visiting the Diocese of Norwich.

Asked by a diocesan representative why he chose to start there, he turned on his charm offensive:

The very good reason that I spent an awful lot of my earlier childhood in Norfolk, love this part of the world; my wife says that when I get up here, I become a slightly different person, more relaxed. And so it was an obvious place to start, and we’re going to Truro on Monday. East Anglia and the Southwest tend to be quite easily forgotten, so I wanted to come up here. It might be easy to write Welby’s statement off as classic CofE “cultural Anglicanism.” It’s disarming, but it’s also overly romantic, something you’d expect from an ex-oil tycoon giving a kitschy portrayal of the Anglian landscape like a good Anglophile. Even militant atheist Richard Dawkins could mouth this sort of cultural Anglicanism; indeed, he actually does to the Spectator.

If Welby is a cultural Anglican, then his next statement reveals his evangelical tendencies. Explaining that he wants to be “centered on Jesus Christ,” he calls the church to prayer together: “The Church praying together and gathering together to pray is something that draws other people to faith in Christ.” Holy Trinity Brompton’s (HTB) Nicky Gumbel couldn’t have said it any better. Indeed, Gumbel’s videos for HTB’s highly effective global evangelism program, The Alpha Course, state that “Christian prayer is the most important activity in our lives.” The 2011 Alpha Prayer Guide performs a literal reading of 2 Chronicles 7:14 where HTB’s “big vision for the re-evangelisation of the nations and the transformation of society” is “conditional upon our humble and fervent prayers.” It would seem that Welby is simply invoking Alpha; some might think he is showing his evangelical cards after the contested primacy of Rowan Williams, an Anglo-Catholic.

But still, *why Norwich?* Do we leave the self-deprecating primate with his cultural Anglican romantic explanation? Do we buy that he’s just toeing the Alpha party line? Or do we look deeper?

I say we look at his comments to the East Anglian Daily Times when he was at Norwich: “Norwich has a great Christian heritage, with Julian of Norwich, with the Cathedral, with the life of the churches across the region.”

Welby lists three aspects of Norwich’s Christian heritage. But really, they’re all the same thing: Julian was an anchoress—a live-in contemplative with her own room at a Norwich church, not far from the Cathedral—who lived in connection with those in the area who sought her out, such as fellow mystic Margery Kempe: “And then she was bidden by our Lord to go to an anchoress in the same city, who was called Dame Julian” (The Book of Margery Kempe, p. 32).

In other words, for Welby, Norwich’s “Christian heritage” is Julian.

I’d like to suggest that when Justin Welby began his Journey in Prayer at Norwich, he was calling the Anglican Communion to pray with Julian the anchoress. It’s because for Welby, Julian is the Anglican Christian par excellence. His first stop on his way to enthronement was to pay her a visit.

We don’t actually know Julian’s real name; we call her Julian because she had a room at the Church of St. Julian in Norwich. What we do know from the Paris Manuscript of her Showings is that on May 13, 1373 (other manuscripts have May 8), she asked for a bodily showing of the Passion of Christ, a bodily sickness, and the gift of the three wounds: of true contrition, kind compassion, and a willful longing to

God (I.2). She got what she wished for: the bodily sickness came when she was 33 years old, taking her to the edge of death, at which point Julian was given a bodily vision of the Passion.

You would think that Julian's reflections would be morbid. You would expect, in fact, that her feelings about her bodily sickness would resonate about how people feel about the divisions in the Anglican Communion these days — “challenging times,” as Welby put it in Norwich.

But what is Julian's reflection on the Passion?

As Julian sees the lurid sight of the “reed bloud rynnynge downe from under the garlande, hote and freyshely, plentuously and lively, right as it was in the tyme that the garland of thornes was pressed on his blessed head,” she says: “And in the same shewing sodeinly the Trinitie filled my hart most of joy, and so I understode it shall be in heaven without end to all that shall come ther” (I.4).

Julian's interpretation of the Passion revolves around the pure joy that stems from the assurance that Christ's wounds and death will keep God's people to the end. The cross of Christ is at the center of Julian's vision. This resonates with Welby's Alpha roots where Nicky Gumbel says that “it's the kind of logo of Christianity.” The celebrated former rector of All Souls' Church, the Rev. John Stott, said just as much. In Stott's classic *The Cross of Christ*, he argues that “the centrality of the cross originated in the mind of Jesus himself” (p. 25). In *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, British historian David Bebbington highlights the centrality of the cross as part of the “conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism” of British evangelicalism rooted in a Reformed Anglican theology (p. 2). Julian's focus on the cross would make any Anglican evangelical's heart sing.

But the fact that Welby invokes Julian as part of Norwich's living heritage suggests that there is something sacramental about this evangelicalism. Speaking to Nicky Gumbel about his near-death experience while doing reconciliation work in Africa, Welby suggests that he sees intimacy with Jesus as inextricable from the Eucharist:

That night, I do remember, though, I had a communion set with me and celebrated communion and spent a long time in prayer, just wanting to make sure that if it didn't go right, the accounts were clean, as it were, sorted things out really, as much as one can. I think fear is dealt with by grace.

Julian is not content with just observing the Passion; she participates in it through the church: “all the helth and lyfe of sacrametyes, alle the vertu and the grace of my worde, alle the goodnesse that is ordeynyd in holy chyrch to the, I it am.” It is this life that opens up the sight of the Triune Godhead for Julian, showing her the “joyes of hevyn with gostely suernesse of endlesse blysse” (XVI.60). For Julian, Welby's Eucharistic encounter was a maternal one; she calls the Lord “Moder Jhesu” (Mother Jesus). That's because Jesus feeds “us with hym selfe and doth full curtesly and full tendyrly with the blessyd sacrament that is precious fode of very lyfe.”

When Welby wants to keep the accounts clean, he feeds on this sacramental grace. This grace is material. This grace is maternal. To borrow from Michael Ramsey's *Gospel* and the Catholic Church, this Eucharistic grace links Welby together in a “more-than-metaphorical” way with Lady Julian.

And if Welby is expressing this sort of communion theology with links to a premodern symbolic world, then even the charge of “cultural Anglicanism” is much deeper than the bad rap that it gets. Historian Eamon Duffy's *Stripping of the Altars* suggests that the later Tudor Protestant attempt to disenchant

English religion may have been violently effective, but its effects were never complete. Duffy claims that the remnants of parish parochialism, as evidenced in one parish vicar, was a sort of last enchanted fortress to the iconoclasm of the state: “For him religion was above all local and particular, ‘rooted in one dear perpetual place,’ his piety centred on this parish, this church, these people” (p. 592).

“This part of the world” of Welby's early childhood remains enchanted because he can still be part of Julian's enchanted world. He is thus more relaxed. He is resting in Lady Julian's famous dictum, “Synne

is behovely, but alle shall be wele, and alle shalle be wele, and alle maner of thyng shalle be wele” (XIII.27). He is being a cultural Anglican because cultural Anglicanism is rooted in the world before the stripping of the altars.

In short, I think Welby is suggesting that if you want to practice Anglican spirituality, you should start by praying with Julian of Norwich, by contemplating the cross with her, by feeding on Jesus with her, by resting in the enchanted world of her “all shall be well.” You could say that the rest of my posts here are going to attempt to explicate just what that means for Anglican theology, spirituality, scholarship, and (of course) politics.

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