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## Address to the Fresh Expressions National Pilgrimage, Coventry Cathedral, December 2008

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Most people undoubtedly think of ‘Fresh Expressions’ as essentially something evangelical. They’re right, of course, in one sense: this is about the good news, the ‘evangel’, and about how it becomes most clearly audible or visible. It would be quite something if the word ‘evangelical’ meant just that. The trouble is that it’s become for so many people simply the badge of one kind of Christian. But, having said that, we should remember that exactly the same is true of ‘catholic’: what if *that* word brought to mind, not one kind of Christian among others, but that dimension of Christian life which is concerned with speaking the whole truth to the whole person – which is pretty much how St Cyril of Jerusalem defined the word in the fourth century?

‘Catholic’ and ‘evangelical’ are words that belong together when they’re properly used, because the good news isn’t particularly good if it isn’t the whole truth for the whole person. But we have to recognize that the words have drifted apart and that they’ve so often been used in restrictive ways. ‘Evangelical’ has come to suggest both a narrow focus on the Bible and an anxious moralism; ‘catholic’ brings to mind a fussy and churchy style of Christianity, more interested in how worship

looks than how it converts or transforms. And although all sorts of things in the last thirty or so years have changed these perceptions – not least the great changes in the Roman Catholic Church, the recovery of Scripture and the re-imagining of worship – the distortions persist.

Still, granted that there are historical differences between the range of ideas evoked by these two words, and granted that mission and evangelism are things that tend to get lumped with evangelical identity, what is there about the catholic identity that's positive, and, still more important, what are the positive things that are specially relevant to fresh expressions of church? In this piece I'll concentrate on four areas. Among the features people associate with catholic spirituality and theology are these:

- Catholics are concerned about non-verbal as well as verbal expressions of faith;
- they give a central place to sacramental action as a necessary way of proclaiming the Word;
- they have a strong sense of the need to see Christian life as something that takes time, that evolves over a period and is symbolized by the recurring journey of the Christian year; and
- they insist that faith is a community experience not only an individual one.

It's quite important to recognize that all of this is in fact deeply biblical – not just a cultural import into the 'simple' world of proclamation. The Bible is full of stories about God communicating through act and sign as well as language – or rather through the language *of* act and sign. One of the saddest and silliest legacies of some kinds of Reformation controversy is the idea that there is some sort of great gulf between God speaking in words and God speaking through events and things. The Bible shows God speaking through history itself before anything else; it shows God being incarnate in a speechless child before the message of the gospel is announced in words. Certainly we *need*

the words to name and communicate what it is that is present in the speechless child; but once this has happened we can see that God's work is not only in words. When we say that the Word became flesh, we implicitly admit that it is the entire flesh and blood of Jesus that 'speaks' God – not just the moments when Jesus opens his mouth to say something. And this in turn helps us make sense of the way in which we are called as Christians to follow the whole path of Jesus' life; as Paul says in Philippians 2, having the 'mind' of Jesus is following his self-emptying journey 'from heaven to earth, from the earth to the cross, from the grave to the skies', as the song puts it. And in all this we are responding to Jesus' call not just to acquire a new set of ideas but to rejoin the people of God and to help reveal God to the world in the character of our life together. This is the basic material of gospel and epistle alike, not to mention the Old Testament. It is very eccentric to reduce all this to a Christian 'message' simply announced in words, received by the mind and expressed in individual behaviour only.

Each of these features has a particularly marked significance in the context in which we are seeking to discover the possibility of fresh expressions of church. It's one of the clichés of our time that we live in an age that is not very receptive to 'book culture'. I actually think this is a bit of an overstatement; but the truth it contains is that, so far from being bound to communication through clear information economically expressed in words, our society is still deeply sensitive to symbols and inclined to express important feelings and perceptions in this way. Anyone who's ever looked at the little pile of flowers and other tributes that accumulates at the site of a traffic accident will realize that something is being said that doesn't lend itself to words, and yet is felt by people to be a necessary way of putting outside themselves the things that can't or mustn't stay inside – a way of communicating something. Of course there are dangers, because at some point we need at least to try and put into words what this is about, however inadequately, so as to be able to communicate it more fully and more truthfully; but this can't be hurried too much.

Similarly, the idea that Christian life is first a matter of acts rather than ideas alone rings bells with many aspects of where we are culturally. We show what we really mean by what happens in and through our bodies; we show our commitments most clearly when we put our bodies on the line, as we say. We may talk about solidarity with the poor, or our deep awareness of the ecological crisis; but where are we to be found? If we're found only in comfortable neighbourhoods or travelling in gas-guzzling machines, there is a bit of a mismatch (and yes, before anyone else points it out, I know I live in a palace and do lots of international air travel, and have to do a fair bit of work to retain any credibility in speaking like about these matters). Once more, it is of the first importance that God makes himself credible to us by *where he is*, i.e. in a body of vulnerable flesh, alongside the outcast, on the cross. He acts to tell us who he is; that's why he is trustworthy. God's dealings with us are events – and not just the sort of event where someone gives a lecture. And when the Bible uses the Greek word *ekklesia* for what happens when God speaks, this is the point it's making: the word means literally a calling-together. When God acts, the event that follows is like the rush of iron filings towards a magnet. Things are disturbed and the pattern of relationships changes. *This* is the Church. If we're thinking about the funny things that happen to words, think about the word 'ecclesiastical': it means for most of us (if we ever use it at all, that is) just churchy. Yet the original word behind it in the Bible is about this rush of filings to the magnet, a turbulence in the very air, like the day of Pentecost.

But of course when things rush together, in the real world of human experience, they take time to settle into a pattern. And this is perhaps where the catholic vision is most in tension with a lot of our contemporary world. So far, I've suggested that the raw materials of catholic identity are very much in tune with aspects of our world; but the one thing we are truly awful at is taking time, or understanding that some outcomes, some processes, just take the time they take – that you can't rush the business of growing. A lot of the misery in our economic crisis

is the result of people more and more losing touch with time – the time taken to build trust, the time taken to bring a new enterprise to maturity and so the time taken to see an investment of energy and money bear fruit.

And many individuals would find it quite hard to know what you were talking about if you started trying to discuss how they made sense of their lives as a developing story, something unfolding over time. The temptation is to think you can always reinvent yourself and that you are what you say you are or what you'd like to be at any moment. It often takes a shock or a tragedy to remind you that your life really is made up of the accumulated effects of choices you may have forgotten, experiences you never registered or understood. Or perhaps in a crisis you realize that where you've been and who you've known has given you resources you didn't know you possessed. Most of the time, though, we live in the moment in a pretty unhelpful way, and it takes a difficult situation to make us see the dangers of living without roots.

Here the catholic insight is counter-cultural. We have, it says, a story, a drama to show you, and if you live inside it, letting your own life be lit up and shown to you afresh by it, you may find that it begins to mould your story and give you a new sense of what's possible. Here's the story of how the maker of everything became part of the world he'd made – letting go of his mystery and otherness to be one of us, so that we might find our way into the mystery and otherness of his love and discover a new way of being at home with ourselves and at home in the universe. This is a lifetime's work (at least), so it helps to have the basic story retold regularly. We find ourselves going around the same territory again and again, but always bringing different material and new memories to it, asking how this fresh experience or insight is going to settle down into the world mapped out by the central story.

Every year, the process is re-enacted. We begin by imagining ourselves in the world before Christ, longing for a release, a new horizon, a world of liberation whose nature we don't yet know. We celebrate the miracle of God arriving in flesh and

blood in our world, and we trace his path through struggle and suffering to death, trying to shift our perspectives and change our priorities (trying to discover *metanoia* in biblical language) so that we see all this as the way into life and out of falsehood. We receive the shattering news that death cannot contain the flesh and blood of Jesus and cannot end the life-giving relationships he creates. And we find out that in the community where these relationships are recognized and thought about and lived out, we learn how to relate to God the Father as Jesus does and to understand that each of us is necessary to the life of the other – the communion of the Holy Spirit. Into this annual course of discovery we put our particular concerns and changes and new perspectives, and it dawns on us slowly that we are finding out who we are by finding out who Jesus is – and vice versa.

Taking time to grow through all this is absolutely bound up with the business of learning from each other, and so recognizing that we need each other. And this is both counter-cultural and deeply resonant in our world. We in the modern ‘West’ live in what is in all kinds of ways a very individualistic environment, where the freedom to become exactly what you want to be, when you want, is often presented as the best thing there is. Yet the sense of isolation, of no-one really wanting to take responsibility for others, produces a frightening feeling of things being fragmented, and people can get very nostalgic about ‘community’. The catholic tradition in Christianity looks as though it invests pretty heavily in community, and in many ways it does; but it also says that community isn’t just a warm huddle that reassures us. It’s a place in which we have to learn to be honest (hence all those catholic disciplines of spiritual formation – self-examination, confession and so on), and it’s a community that is always pushing us beyond our comfort zones, because it’s a community existing by God’s invitation and God’s faithful accompaniment, not our own sense of what will make us feel safe. We’re always struggling to keep up with God’s movement outwards to reach all human beings; he’s always ahead of us, already talking to the people we hoped we wouldn’t have to meet.

Now all this suggests that catholic identity has a huge amount to say to the fresh expressions world – and, perhaps a bit surprisingly, that it helps get a rather different picture of what ‘church’ means. Or, put it another way, it prompts the question, ‘what does it take to make a church, for a church to be *there*?’ A good catholic theology of the Church starts well back beyond any issues around institutions; it starts by asking how a community embodies, practically and visibly, some of the things we’ve been thinking about. It starts by acknowledging that ‘church’ is an event – a calling together; and that when this calling together has happened, what follows is a set of acts and words that get us walking in step with Jesus, praying his prayers, living his life, not as a matter of historical reconstruction but as a kind of singing in tune with his eternal relation with his Father. Church is where the Son’s journey from the Father’s heart into death and hell, and back again, is lived out.

And the sacraments of the Church are there not as mysterious rituals to deepen our sense of group identity – though of course they do that among other things. They are there to tell us what story it is that defines the shape of our world, and to take us further on our journey, on our following out the Son’s journey. Something is needed to anchor what we’re doing in what God is doing – in the event that is God’s action, not ours. And the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion simply announce that *here* something is being done that isn’t our work. We pour the water; God accepts us as sons and daughters. We pray over the bread and wine and share them; God renews in us the gift of his Son’s life and hears our prayers as if they were Christ’s, taking us for a moment into the fully reconciled joy that awaits us at the end of all things. Church is not primarily an event in which we do something, think something, feel something; it is being together in a situation where we trust God to do something and to change us – whether or not we notice it, let alone fully understand it.

That’s why, whatever the practical problems, one of the questions that fresh expressions of church have to deal with is how to manage this crossover from what we do to what God does;

how to create an environment in which church can happen in the fullest sense, with the sacramental life flowing through as a sign and channel of God's action. Because the Catholic ought to be able, believe it or not, on the basis of what we've been thinking about, to sit very light to quite a lot of the externals of institution and form, the Catholic is in a good position to break the mould and concentrate on what sort of environment allows God the space to be God, actively and transformingly. The universal, recognisable signs, the presence of recognisable people (ordained ministers) whose responsibility it is to keep these signs in focus and see that they happen – this is not a matter of mechanical requirements imposed on a spontaneous human gathering, but of how the human gathering remembers that it isn't ever *just* a human gathering. Properly understood, the sacramental life in a congregation is inseparable from the impulse to silence, adoration, willingness to receive – all the things that break us free from the tyranny of hectic activism and trying to achieve. It goes with all those things we discussed earlier about how catholic practice both resonates with and fundamentally challenges so much of our current cultural scene.

And that, finally, is a central aspect of what is good news, what is evangelical, about a catholic approach to fresh expressions of church. Evangelicals are rightly passionate about the supremacy of grace and the fact that we are not saved by human effort; Catholics affirm that for this to go on being real for us, we need, not just better communication strategies, more lively language or more up to the minute activities, important as these are, but practices – such as Baptism and Eucharist, where Scripture truly becomes contemporary happening – that anchor us in the fleshliness of the Word who became human, in the story of the time he took and takes to bring us home to his Father, in the awareness of our need for each other. The practical challenges are legion, as we all know; but a genuine catholic vision of the Church can give us indispensable resources for seeing the Church in its fullness, flexibly and hopefully, because it makes us see it in, and only in, the light of God's own action.