

The Solemn Declaration: The Net of Memory

The Solemn Declaration:

The Net of Memory

by David Curry

Memory: Our Sense of Who We Are

One of our Nova Scotian writers, Ernest Buckler, has wonderfully observed that “the net of memory has a mesh all its own. Events the size of lives slip through it and are lost; yet it can catch and hold the merest fragments of occasion”. Buckler’s novel, *The Mountain and The Valley*, is a beautiful elegy and his *Ox Bells* and *Fireflies* are lyrical songs, almost laments, for a Maritime world that, for him, was already vanishing and now, for us, is past and gone. And yet, the form of memory which he presents offers something more than merely lament. The memory retains things that are precious and present, things that are essential and holy, things that are a matter of identity and life because they are connected. They are gathered into something coherent and whole, into a pattern and design, like the pattern of the rug which provides the narrative framework of *The Mountain and The Valley*.

The question is whether our present memory – our sense of who we are simply catches hold of “the merest fragments of occasion” – the scattered shards of broken lives – or perhaps embraces “a medley of fragments” which are somehow linked together, holding out the possibility of a vision of connectedness. The point is that the net of memory gathers. It is not just the size of the mesh, but the very idea of the gathering which is so crucial. What must be grasped is a remembering of the act of remembering itself. The gathering, I wish to argue, implies a vision of connectedness.

The ambiguity of memory is a contemporary commonplace. To a greater or lesser degree, we are all aware of the selective and arbitrary nature of our memories, as well as the kinds of remembering

that are an intentional forgetting. The forms of modernity, both in their greatness and their danger, their “grandeur et misere”, as Charles Taylor puts it, exist in states of incompleteness with respect to their own intellectual and spiritual origins. The dangers of a selective remembering or a wilful forgetting of the past are only too apparent in the clash of ideologies, whether they are those of the left or the right, whether they are traditional or radical, no matter how great their appeal to some aspect or other of our contemporary souls. The post-modern attempts to achieve limited solutions to these conflicts only heightens the sense of division and the extent of the fragmentation. But perhaps, too, they may deepen the desire for a greater remembering.

The forms of our selective remembering are all questions about the size of the mesh. These ambiguities of memory lead, however, to more than just a scepticism about the mesh. They lead as well to a forgetting of the net of memory itself and to a denial of the possibilities of the gathering. The result is the barrenness of our desires, so imaginatively captured in P.D. James’ novel *The Children of Men*. Yet, precisely in the face of the felt limitations of our selective remembering and in the midst of the denial of the possibilities of remembering, there emerges a new necessity.

The Gathering of Modernity’s Nihilism and Self-Completeness

What can no longer be assumed but has to be actively remembered is the intentional quality inherent in the act of remembering itself. The intention is that the gathering should be full and complete. The intention is implicit in the image of the net of memory which must gather into itself the experience of the barren nothingness of contemporary life as well as the forms of its asserted self-completeness. “Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing; nevertheless, at thy word I will let down the net” (Luke 5.5).

The gathering is to Jesus Christ. He alone makes something out of nothing, even out of the barren nothingness of human lives. There is the approbation of the multitude: “He hath done all things well; he maketh both the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak” (Mark 7.37). There is the claim which he himself makes: “the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them. And blessed is

he whosoever shall not be offended in me” (Matthew 11.5,6). Everything that is nothing is gathered into something.

And what about the forms of asserted self-completeness? They, too, are acknowledged but only so as to be gathered into something more. For there is always the question to be asked or refused, the question about our relation to an infinite good: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10.17-22), asks the man who had everything, it seems, “for he had great possessions” and, as a ruler (Luke 18.18), much power. And he was young (Matthew 19.20). Jesus responds by pointing beyond himself as just a moral teacher, to God. “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments” (Mark 10.18,19). He proceeds to list our duties towards our neighbour. The rich young man replies, “All these I have observed from my youth”. “And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me’ “(Mark 10.21).

What is missing? Only something more beyond the finite equation of obligations given and received between one another. “If you would be perfect”, adds St. Matthew (19.21). For Jesus’ counsel is a counsel of perfection. Yet, this is what the initial question seeks. The something more is everything without which what one has is nothing. And that is why it requires the surrender, even the sacrifice, of what one thinks that one has already.

It is not simply our duty towards God, seemingly overlooked in Jesus’ mentioning of the moral commandments, for that already underlies our moral duties towards one another, whether acknowledged or not. What is missing is a real participation in an infinite and eternal good which gathers up the finite properties of justice into the perfect and infinite form of justice that is God’s charity. What is missing is what God provides in Christ Jesus. “Brethren, you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich yet for your sake he became poor that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8.9). The forms of our attachments have an infinite value when they are connected to our “treasure in heaven”, when they are gathered to an infinite good. Everything that is something is gathered into something more.

The gathering is by Jesus Christ. “I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10.10). “Abide in me, and I in you.. for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15.4,5). In the greyness of the year, comes Christ the King and Shepherd of our souls. Jesus strides across the

barren fields of human lives to gather us into the barn and garner of his Kingdom. He gathers us in his essential identity as the Son of the Father in the bond of the Holy Spirit and he gathers us by virtue of his identity with us as the Son of God become the Son of Man for us.

The Trinity and the Incarnation are themselves the great images of gathering, the gathering of all the images of God, and the gathering together of all the images of humanity and divinity. They are gathered into an order of understanding by an act of understanding, an act of intellection; in short, an act of gathering the images of salvation. Our Christian identity belongs to these great acts of gathering, the Trinity and the Incarnation. At baptism, we are identified in God's own identifying of himself: "I baptize..... in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost". We are identified with Jesus in his death and resurrection for us. He gathers us to himself through an act of understanding sacramentally enacted. Salvation is our identity in the Son, our being with Jesus because of who he is in his twofold identity: his identity with the Father and his identity with us.

But what is the particular form of our Christian identity? For like it or not, our Christian identity comes with adjectives attached. It cannot be otherwise because our Christian lives are lived in certain places the places where we belong and to which we are attached – and we all carry with us certain histories – there is a story which belongs to who we are and which attaches itself to us individually and collectively. The net of memory gathers us to Christ through the particular forms of our attachments and from all the particular places of our lives.

Ultimately, to live as the image of the Trinity and in the spirit of the Word made flesh means that we find our story within God's own story written out for us to read in Jesus Christ. Consequently, there is always the question about the adequacy of the particular context of our lives to the essential content of our Christian identity. There is always the question about the quality of the adjective which is attached to our sense of religious identity. What does it mean to be an Anglican Christian?

Declaration of Witness: The Solemn Declaration as Memory Witnessed

The Solemn Declaration of 1893 goes some way towards providing the form of an answer to this question for Anglican Christians in Canada. It does so intentionally through its twofold emphasis. It emphasizes first, our fundamental identity in Christ as members of his body, the church, and

secondly, the particular form of our Christian identity through which it is expressed, lived and maintained. The paragraphs beginning “We declare” and “And we are determined” state respectively the clear intention of the Declaration and the determined form of its realization.

It is instructive and important to note that the particular identity of the Anglican Church as a church is subordinate to the meaning of the Church Universal and that it exists as a church only insofar as it is connected to that universal reality. The intention is to establish the sense in which this “Church of England in the Dominion of Canada” shall be understood to be a church as distinct from a sect, a denomination or simply a bureaucratic religious organization.

The further intent is to establish the particular form by which that universal ecclesial identity can be realized and expressed in lives of faithfulness and prayer, in lives of commitment and sacrifice, in lives of loving service and care for one another, and in lives of loving devotion and praise to God in the Canadian places where we find ourselves. In other words, the context exists for the sake of the content. The content is embodied in a certain context. The particular context of the Church of England in Canada or the Anglican Church of Canada must always be referred back to the essential content of what it means to be the church. The essential content, consequently, acts as a measure and constitutes the substantive principle of our Christian identity.

The supreme importance of the Solemn Declaration lies in this. The Solemn Declaration is a Declaration of Witness. It witnesses to what it means to be a church. It connects us with the things which constitute the being of a church. The witness extends outwards to the wider world and to the communities where we live, but it also confronts us with a mirror and a measure about the quality of our witness, both personally and corporately.

Christian life is inescapably and undeniably life in the church. It is life in the body of Christ. Life in the body is fundamental to any Christian identity. Being a Christian connects us with others, both those in the body and through the body with the whole of humanity. It is neither an anonymous nor a solitary affair.

Even the anchorite who meditates alone,

For whom the days and nights repeat the praise of God,

Prays for the Church, the Body of Christ incarnate.

(T.S. Eliot, Chorus's from "The Rock")

The question, of course, is always about the form of the body and the nature of our association in the body. The question highlights the necessity for a declaration of witness with respect to the essential nature of the church and the particular form of its expression.

First and foremost, the witness is to God. The church exists for the praise of God. Such is the true end or purpose of humanity and, indeed, the reason for the whole creation. It exists quite simply for the praise of God. The Solemn Declaration may be said to begin and end with the praise of the Trinity. It begins and ends with the witness to God in himself. But in that witness we are made partakers of what we have been given to bear witness to. The church is the form of our participation in the life of God. The witness includes our being gathered to the one whom we are given to acknowledge.

The entire Declaration places the church, both universal and particular, under the identity of the God who is to be praised. The Declaration begins with the invocation of the name of God in his revealed threefold identity: "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost".

We have heard these words so often that we are apt to take them for granted and pay them little or no heed. We are apt to regard them as merely a customary formula quaint, pious, not a little archaic, and hardly 'politically correct' – mindlessly trotted out to lend a certain portentous sounding dignity to the beginning of something or other of greater or lesser importance in the church. We fail, I think, to take seriously the intent of the words.

God is invoked in the completeness of his self-revelation. Everything which follows from the invocation puts itself intentionally under the perspective of that divine self-sufficiency. It intends to be measured by the Trinitarian reality of God and to be gathered into that all-sufficient divine life. For whatever is true lives in the truth of God. It is something only in his knowing and loving of it, only in

his gathering of it to himself. Everything which follows takes shape within that Trinitarian identity of God.

Everything which follows belongs to the church. In general, there is a kind of progression from the particular context of the Anglican Church in Canada to the essential content of what constitutes the church and, then, from the essential content of the church to the actual form by which that content may be realized in its Anglican context. The Bishops speak. “We, the Bishops. . . make [this] Solemn Declaration.” They do not speak in isolation nor in the independence of their own office but with other representatives of the constitutive elements of the church: “Delegates from the Clergy and Laity. . . now assembled in the first General Synod”. Under the aegis of the Trinity, their first act, as it were, is a concise self-limiting proclamation – the Solemn Declaration.

“We declare this church to be and desire that it shall continue....”

“This church” is neither the Bishops nor the Bishops in Synod, but the body from which the Synod is composed and to which the Bishops belong. It is “the Church of England in the Dominion of Canada”. The Synod does not create anything new, neither a new church nor an independent church. The Church of England in Canada already had an identity – a received identity – through which it lays claim to being a church and to which it remains connected, as the clause “in full communion with the Church of England throughout the world” reminds us.

More importantly, however, the Declaration seeks to remind “this church” of the necessary conditions of its being and continuing “as an integral portion of the One Body of Christ”. What does it mean to be an integral portion – a whole part – of that one body? The one body of Christ is not a single institutional church nor is it merely the sum total of institutional churches. It is a spiritual and invisible reality visibly expressed. It is “composed of Churches”, visible churches, which share common principles of identity. The churches are plural in their visibility, one in their spiritual identity. What are the basic common principles of their spiritual identity as whole parts of the one body of Christ?

First, the churches are “united under One Divine Head and in the fellowship of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church”. Christ is the head of the church; the church is the body of Christ. In a way, this is a complete statement of identity. All that follows is contained within it. But the connections have to be drawn out. The full extent of the gathering has to be seen.

Christ as divine, Christ in his essential Trinitarian identity, is the head of the church. We have fellowship in what we are united under. The statement follows the logic of the Creeds. “I believe in One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church” follows upon our belief in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. The church is constituted by this witness visibly expressed in the churches.

Secondly, the churches are integral portions of the one body of Christ according as they “hold the One Faith revealed in Holy Writ and defined in the Creeds”; “receive the same Canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments”; “teach the same Word of God”; “partake of the same Divinely ordained Sacraments”; and “worship One God and Father through the same Lord Jesus Christ, by the same Holy and Divine Spirit who is given to them that believe to guide them into all truth”.

With this last principle, the Solemn Declaration appears to have come full circle, returning to the Trinity in worship from whom it began in invocation. This Trinitarian worship gathers into the life of God everything which belongs to the essential identity of the church. The gathering is neither narrow nor confining. The gathering is not into a fortress with the doors shut fast against the world. Rather it is in the confidence of the completeness of such a gathering that the church, so constituted under this Trinitarian identity, reaches out to gather all the images of experience into this Trinitarian relation. Such is the work of the Holy Spirit “who is given to them that believe to guide them into all truth”. The phrase explicitly echoes Christ’s own teaching that the Holy Spirit “will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14.26) and “will guide you into all truth” (John 16.13). The intent of the gathering is that nothing be lost, that nothing be lacking. All that is true must be brought into the truth of this divine self-relation. But that will only be possible through the quality of the church’s witness to God’s self-revelation.

With these central phrases, the Solemn Declaration seeks to establish the essential doctrinal principles of the church’s identity. While they are, I think, logically complete, they are not intended to be exhaustive. Some of these have qualifying clauses attached to them in the Declaration itself. All of them are capable of further qualification and considerable elaboration, not with respect to the

purpose of the Solemn Declaration itself, but with regard to what may legitimately develop from them. In fact, all of them embrace worlds of theological argument and engage various schools of spirituality. But the point is that they are the essential principles, both in themselves and in their connectedness, without which we cannot understand what it means to be a church, “an integral portion of the One Body of Christ”.

No doubt, these principles all require our careful attention and some more so than others. I wish to highlight one or two in particular. The principle of “hold[ing] the One Faith revealed in Holy Writ and defined in the Creeds” is qualified by the clause “as maintained by the undivided primitive church in the undisputed Ecumenical Councils”. This allows for a considerable degree of latitude in terms of how one understands “the undivided primitive church” (i.e. how primitive? how undivided?), the number of councils and, by consequence, the number of Creeds.

The Athanasian Creed, for example, cannot be said to be an universal creed in the same sense as the Nicene Creed because it does not appear in any of the Ecumenical Councils. It is a Creed received and used in the West as perfectly consonant with Holy Scripture and the other Creeds, but neither universally nor anciently used in the East. Its use in the Western churches is justified on the strength of its inherent doctrinal compatibility on matters of essential doctrine with the other Creeds and with Scripture. But it cannot be required as a necessary element in what it means to be a whole part of “the One Body of Christ”.

In the same way, the celebrated Filioque clause cannot be required as essential to the universal definition of the church. Its absence from the Creed in the Eastern church does not ‘unchurch’ the Orthodox. But neither does its presence in the Western churches, where it has exercised such a formative and fundamental role in shaping the particular form of our Christian identity, make those churches any less integral portions of the one body of Christ. The argument for its presence in the Western use of the Creed must proceed upon some other theological basis than conciliar consensus.

What is not in question is the necessary connection between Scripture and Doctrine and, in particular, the necessity of the Creeds as defining the “One Faith revealed in Holy Writ”. This is, however, very much in question in the contemporary churches and especially, in the new world of alternative liturgies. This contemporary problem is twofold.. first, the difficulty in recognizing that the

Christian faith is revealed in the Holy Scriptures, primarily and essentially, rather than being derived from a reflection upon the varieties of human experience; and, second, the difficulty in recognizing that the Creeds give philosophic form to the inherent positivism of the Scriptures through which other images, scriptural as well as non-scriptural, can be thought and given expression.

The Creeds represent the gathering of the scriptural images of salvation into an order of understanding from which it is possible to think a host of other images, insofar as they are gathered into the revealed Trinitarian identity of God. We have already seen how this understanding informs the structure and intent of the Solemn Declaration in its articulation of the fundamental principles of “the One Body of Christ”. There is a pressing necessity for us to recall this in relation to the particular form of our essential Christian identity.

The principle of “receiv[ing] the same Canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments” is qualified by the clause “as containing all things necessary to salvation”. The qualification is essential and necessary as providing adequate avenues of approach to the understanding of Scripture. The clause recalls us to the purpose of the Scriptures: to reveal God to man and to redeem man to God. In this regard, the Scriptures are neither a cudgel with which to beat the contemporary world over the head nor a handbook for revolutionary change-agents of one sort or another. The principle provides a necessary check upon the various forms of the politicization of the Gospel which arise out of a despair or a refusal to think the purpose of the Scriptures. The clause focuses our reading of the Scriptures upon the matter of our spiritual identity in Christ which embraces social and political realities, but cannot be reduced to them. It offers a net of a wider gathering than what remains when it is forgotten. This clause connects with the previous principle; “the One Faith revealed in Holy Writ” is “defined in the Creeds”. The Creeds succinctly express the Scriptural essentials of salvation. That is their purpose. It also connects with the particular form of our Christian identity embodied in the Prayer Book, the Ordinal and the Articles of Religion: in the Prayer Book, by the doctrinal or credal understanding of Scripture which it presents through the liturgical services and in the lectionary provisions for the reading of Scripture in the Offices and at the Holy Communion; in the Ordinal, by the explicit vows required of Deacons, Priests and Bishops at their ordinations and consecration; and in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, specifically, Articles VI and XX.

It also connects to the following principle; “teach[ing] the same Word of God”. For what is received can only be taught according to the purpose of its being written. Scripture is written for the purpose of our learning the things of salvation, and so, it must be taught.

The Form of our Witness: The BCP as Memory Practised

All that is held, received, taught and partaken of sacramentally is gathered into the worship of God in his threefold identity. Thus, the Solemn Declaration concludes its statement of witness about the essential content of our Christian identity in “the One Body of Christ”. But the Solemn Declaration does not end there. It goes on to establish the particular form of our Christian identity through which the essential content of our lives in Christ is received, expressed and continued.

First of all, the Solemn Declaration places the Anglican Church under the Word of God. “And we are determined by the help of God to hold and maintain the Doctrine, Sacraments and Discipline of Christ as the Lord hath commanded in his Holy Word.” Here particular emphasis is given to the authority or primacy of the Holy Scriptures with respect to what is held, received, taught and sacramentally partaken. The inclusion of discipline belongs to the visible expression of the Christian faith; in short, the life of the visible church. Here the intention is that discipline be scripturally measured.

The statement intentionally connects with the foregoing principles of the essential content of the church. The particular emphasis given to the place of Scripture in the life of this church defines one of the basic characteristics of our Anglican Christian identity. It belongs to the intentional quality of the adjective Anglican. But how is this quality to be expressed in the life of this church? By the form through which this church has received its being “as an integral portion of the One Body of Christ”.

“The Church of England hath received and set forth” what is held and maintained as Word-governed. Through the Church of England, what is received connects the church in Canada to the continuum of faith, prayer and order in the historic church. What is set forth embodies what is received. It expresses the particular form of our Anglican Christian identity. The Word-governed “Doctrine, Sacraments and Discipline of Christ” are set forth in the Book of Common Prayer and in the

Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. They express what the Solemn Declaration intends this church to hold, maintain and transmit unimpaired.

The Solemn Declaration provides for what it presents, both in the articulation of a system of theological thought – the Articles of Religion – and in the form of ordered prayer – the Book of Common Prayer. Crucially, the Book of Common Prayer gives living shape to the particular form of our Christian identity. It offers and presents a vision of connectedness.

The Solemn Declaration is a public document, promulgated at the time of its ratification in 1893 to be the cornerstone of an Anglican self-understanding in Canada. It originates with the first General Synod as the statement of principles under which the church self-knowingly places itself. It is a self-limiting document clearly establishing the doctrinal and constitutional principles of the Church of England in Canada.

Yet, it really only fully came to public notice when it was printed in 1959 with the Book of Common Prayer to which it makes explicit reference as embodying the very principles of an Anglican Christian self-understanding. Without that printed attachment to the Prayer Book, we would be talking about a document which has been largely hidden from view for more than half its one hundred year history. Printing the Solemn Declaration within the Book of Common Prayer (1959), however, does something more than simply bring it into public view. It shows the living form of its principles. The connection with the Prayer Book is not accidental. It is integral to the content of the Solemn Declaration and, thus, to the identity of Anglican Christians.

a) The Shape of our Christian Identity

What would it mean to be an Anglican Christian if there were no Book of Common Prayer? The question is not simply rhetorical. There has been and is actual talk about Anglicanism after or without the Prayer Book. I simply ask what it would mean for the shape of our Christian identity, for the form in which we pray and live and understand the Christian faith? The question is about the quality of the adjective which is attached to our sense of religious identity. What does it mean to be an Anglican Christian if there is no Book of Common Prayer?

No doubt, there are many answers. Some say ‘we are defined as Anglicans because we have Bishops’; others say ‘we have Synods’ or ‘Bishops and Synods’. Some say ‘we have fixed liturgical

forms for worship', regardless of what they are; others say 'we have a certain liturgical style'. Some say 'we have the Bible'; others say 'we have the Holy Spirit'.

Some say 'we have a local church built by my Anglican ancestors where my family who have always been Anglicans have always worshipped'; others say 'we have an institutional structure with diocesan and national offices connected to a multi-national conglomerate' – the diocesan and national policies define us and set the company agenda, both how high to jump and upon which passing bandwagons.

Some say 'we have a certain social rank and standing; we drink tea, sip sherry and vote Tory', or at least used to. Others say 'we are committed to Social action and political change, drink herbal tea, quaff chilled white wine and vote NDP', or at least used to.

Are these answers merely caricatures? Only partly so. Are they 'straw men', set up so as to be easily knocked down? No. They are all quite true. But in what way they are true, both in themselves and in the connections between them, is only thinkable through the Book of Common Prayer. Take away the Prayer Book and these answers all collapse into the opposing positions and irreconcilable oppositions of our contemporary confusions. Take away the Prayer Book and there is nothing distinctively Anglican about any one of them, and much that is dubiously even Christian.

I want to argue that the Book of Common Prayer is more than just one of the identifying marks of Anglican Christianity. I want to argue that it is the critical matrix through which Anglicans have understood the meaning of their Christian identity and have understood themselves to be "an integral portion of the One Body of Christ". It is not just one thing in a long list of things somehow known as Anglican. The Book of Common Prayer is the form of prayer and life through which all those other things can be grasped and understood in their connectedness. It is the shape of our Christian identity.

Consequently, it has been the hardest thing for Anglicans to deal with. Among contemporary Anglicans, there is a deep-seated affection for the Book of Common Prayer. But there is also a profound ambivalence towards it. And, equally, there is a remarkable animosity against it. What are we to make of these attitudes?

Such things, I think, are about the mesh of our memories. They all neglect the net of memory. The intent of the gathering is forgotten in the antagonisms of our affections. There is no remembering of the act of remembering itself.

b) The Mesh and The Net

The problem for contemporary Anglicans is not about the idea or even the fact of alternative liturgies and books of liturgies in themselves. The problem is about the selective and limited forms of remembering which they represent, on the one hand, and about the selective and limited forms of our remembering the Prayer Book, on the other hand. The problem is about the narrowness of our vision because we have forgotten the intent of the gathering.

For in the affection, the ambivalence and the antagonism against the Prayer Book, there is a common tendency to identify the Book of Common Prayer with a particular social and political world. The Prayer Book is basically identified with the world of the British Empire and all things Victorian, a world which is past and gone, but which, like so much of the nineteenth century, retains an ambiguous hold on the twentieth. There is at once an attraction and a revulsion.

The Anglican world of alternative liturgies, for example, has a common starting-point in the explicit rejection of the Book of Common Prayer as the basis for liturgical revision. While there is a greater or lesser degree of animosity towards the Prayer Book tradition throughout the churches of the Anglican Communion, the relation of the alternative liturgies to the origin and form of our Anglican identity is incomplete and unsatisfactory.

The Prayer Book, of course, cannot be reduced to the particular social and political world of the late nineteenth century, any more than it can be dismissed as a sixteenth century literary artefact or, more curiously, as a medieval penitential relic. It is forgotten that the Prayer Book has endured several centuries which are quite diverse in every way -socially, politically, culturally, theologically, whatever. One has only to recall the enormous differences and varieties of expression in the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Book of Common Prayer has survived on the strength of its spiritual integrity. The uncompromising clarity of the Prayer Book about essential doctrine, about the necessity of discipline and devotion, and about the ideals of moral life have challenged and engaged the cultural

assumptions of quite different worlds. And so, too, it challenges and engages the post-Christian assumptions of our contemporary world. But it refuses to be collapsed into any one of these moments. It offers instead a way of being connected to the essential content of the Christian faith through which it provides a connection to everything else. Ultimately, it offers a way of gathering all things to Jesus Christ.

The Solemn Declaration is dated 1893. Is it simply a product of the late nineteenth century, heavily weighted with the cultural baggage of that world and time? It is not. It is emphatically not an imperialist manifesto nor a colonialist declaration of independence. It is a Declaration of Witness which connects us to the essential things through the form in which we have received them. Basically, it travels light.

In terms of place of origin, it is a frontier document, composed and proclaimed in the frontier realities of the Western territories of Canada. It is the product of a church facing the prospects of further missionary expansion into the West and North, and envisioning the further settlement and growth of the church in the East and Centre in the cities, towns, and villages as well as in the many outposts of Atlantic Canada, many of which have not changed substantially since then.

At a time when the principles of religious authority in the churches had already fragmented into a variety of opposing tendencies, the Solemn Declaration is remarkable for the tenor of its reasonableness and for the modesty of its quiet insistence upon the essentials. Importantly, it reaches behind the nineteenth century to connect with the principles of classical Anglicanism but with a view to their present vitality for the building of a church. More importantly, it offers a vision of connectedness and gives us the form in which that vision can be realized. It is the Book of Common Prayer.

Where do things stand at present? Right now in Canada in the institutional church to which we are attached, there is, finally, the acknowledgement that there is no unanimity on religious matters. There is' instead, the recognition of a complete diversity of views. It is no longer possible to claim that things are moving in one particular direction and that every one must either get on board or get lost. The convergence between the Ecumenical Movement, Biblical Theology, and the Liturgical Movement, which animated the Anglican world of alternative liturgies, no longer holds. The Ecumenical Movement has largely failed in the achievement of its ecclesiastical political objectives,

however much good will it may have fostered among Christians of different denominations. Modern Biblical Criticism is increasingly subject to an intense criticism of its own critical assumptions. The Liturgical Movement is caught in the conflict of interest groups demanding liturgical expression for their ideological viewpoint. In every way, there is a complete fragmentation of outlooks.

No doubt, the Solemn Declaration and the Book of Common Prayer are viewed as one of the many fragments. The Prayer Book Society, for instance, is regarded as a special interest group. No doubt, in the present state of affairs, this has to be. There is, after all, an importance in simply enduring and steadfastly being there. The letter to the church in Ephesus in the Book of Revelation recalls us to the necessity of “enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake” and of “not growing weary” (Rev.2.3).

But the Solemn Declaration and the Book of Common Prayer are about something more than merely one fragment of one point of view. There is a pressing necessity to uphold a vision of connectedness, a way to think the images of salvation and to gather all the fragmented bits and pieces of contemporary life back to Christ. We need to remember this for ourselves and for the church to which we belong and for the wider fellowship of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. We need to remember to remember. The letter to the church in Sardis in the Book of Revelation is written to us all: “remember then what you received and heard; keep that, and repent” (Rev.3.3).

The task of remembering is considerable, but without the labour of remembering we impoverish our lives and make ourselves nothing. We diminish, distort and disparage our own form of Christian identity.

There is the claim that the Book of Common Prayer is theologically ‘monochrome’. But surely not. The strength of its essential pattern of spirituality actually embraces and engages various schools of theological emphasis and spirituality within and without Anglicanism itself. For example, there is the ‘Holiness School’ of spirituality, represented in Jeremy Taylor, with its great emphasis on sanctification almost to the point of eclipsing the principle of justification. Yet, it is just the interplay of the principles of justification and sanctification, expressed in the Common Prayer tradition, which is able to contain and correct an undue emphasis upon one or the other.

The interplay of these principles is a fundamental feature of the spirituality of the Prayer Book hardly even acknowledged in the current debates. They belong, without doubt, to the extent of the net of memory and to the form of our incorporation in the one body of Christ. They shape the understanding from which Anglican divines could engage the various schools of Reformation and Counter-Reformation spirituality and beyond.

The vision of connectedness, which the Book of Common Prayer and the Solemn Declaration offer and present, even provides a way of embracing the world of the Book of Alternative Services (1985). This cannot work the other way around. The Prayer Book offers a large and comprehensive view which can contain and correct much of what is wanted to be affirmed in the world of the BAS. But it can do so only on the basis of its firm insistence upon the essentials of the Christian faith.

In the recent acknowledgment of the current diversity of theological opinion in Canada, it has been observed that the proponents of the Book of Alternative Services place an emphasis on the 'economic' Trinity -God in his relation to us – at the expense of God in his Transcendence or God in himself. Yet, the classical western understanding of the double Trinity – God in himself and God in his relation to us – is actually the large view which can embrace and gather a host of images about God. Thinking the divine self-sufficiency provides a necessary way of keeping the various images of God from vanishing into indeterminacy. It offers a way of affirming what is legitimately wanted to be affirmed by gathering them to God in himself.

There continues to be much debate about confession of sin and the necessity of penitence. The Prayer Book has been frequently accused of being overly penitential; the BAS, as being overly optimistic. The proponents of the BAS now argue that penitence, of course, is necessary and that the BAS upholds this view. But confession is regarded as a precondition of celebration. This is a far narrower view than the Prayer Book where confession equally belongs to the heart of celebration. This is an insight common to the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. The confession of sin, after all, is a confession of praise. The awareness of sin increases our sense of joy. The Prayer Book may be said to include a view which the BAS excludes.

Conclusion

The Solemn Declaration and the Book of Common Prayer remind us of the net of memory and the intent of the gathering. Their focus upon the great and essential images of gathering, the Trinity and the Incarnation, is a constant reminder of the act of remembering itself. They offer and present a vision of connectedness. It is what the poets sing as well.

The poetry of George Herbert, perhaps, provides a connection with the prose of Ernest Buckler, with which we began, and helps us to understand better the intent of the gathering that belongs to the net of memory. Herbert's poetry ranges over a great and diverse landscape of images – scriptural, historical, political, natural and domestic. But it is not a random, indiscriminate array. It is, rather, a “medley of fragments” which sing a prayerful “kind of tune which all things hear and fear”. His poetry recognizes the primacy of certain images as being more substantial, more complete, and more precious than others. It is through the greater images, however, that so many other images can have substance and meaning, beauty and form. Herbert recalls us to the greater images, to those essential images of gathering, the Trinity and the Incarnation.

Thou hast but two rare cabinets full of treasure,

the Trinitie, and Incarnation:

Thou hast unlockt them both,

And made them jewels to betroth

the work of thy creation

Unto thyself in everlasting pleasure.

(George Herbert, “Ungratefulnesse”)

The vision of connectedness is, ultimately, a vision of delight. The Solemn Declaration reminds us that this vision belongs to the being of the church. It is what the poets sing...

“Delight thou in the Lord, and thou shalt have

thy heart’s desire.”

<http://prayerbook.ca/resources/onlinelibrary/machray-review/solemn-declaration-net-memory/>