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# *Dying to Live: the Vocation of Anglicanism*<sup>1</sup>

SIMON BARRINGTON-WARD

**'Truly, truly, I say unto you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.'** John 12: 24-25

My first journey to another part of the world after I became General Secretary of CMS was to East Africa. I stayed in the house of Akis Wesonga, then Provincial Secretary, afterwards Bishop of Mbale, and Janet, his wife, who preached at the 1988 Lambeth Conference. I went one evening to a wonderful gathering of the Ugandan Bishops in Archbishop Luwum's house. The Archbishop was particularly kind and welcoming and took me out on to the verandah, where we sat at a table together to eat.

As we talked, he told me that his life was in danger. Ever since the meeting which the Archbishop had held with Cardinal Nsubuga and the Bishops of their two churches and with representatives of the Orthodox and Muslim communities at Lweza outside Kampala, at which they had reviewed the crisis of the economy, of justice and of human rights in Uganda, Archbishop Janani had known that his life was under threat. Shortly after that, I remember, he had spoken at a police barracks in Nsambya. 'Uganda is killing Uganda,' he had said. 'We look to you to uphold the laws of this land.'

He still spoke of our duty to love and to pray for the President. But he was willing to speak out fearlessly.

Now, I gathered, he had to take a different way to his office each day, because there were people who might be lying in wait for him to shoot at him. I remember his telling me quite calmly and cheerfully that he did not feel he would be able to last long. I was appalled. 'We must get you out of the country for a bit,' I suggested. 'Can't we arrange for a kind of sabbatical for you until the situation eases?' He smiled gently and shook his head in a certain characteristic way that he had.

'Twenty-eight years ago, I gave my heart over to the Lord, and should I not trust him to dwell in me and with me now?' he said. 'My people need me here at this time and I know that whatever happens, whether I live or die, the Lord

1 Sermon in the chapel of the College of the Ascension (Selly Oak) at the inauguration of the Centre for Anglican Communion Studies, 1st December 1992.

will keep me in his will!' As he said this, it seemed to me that his face truly shone, as Acts describes Stephen's face shining. And I say this, not because of what happened to him subsequently, but because I remember recording it and telling others about it at the time. This is no pious hagiography added afterwards. It is a genuine memory. Indeed, I was not surprised when I heard later from Bishop Festo Kivengere, of the events at the Nile Mansions Hotel, next to the International Conference Centre in Kampala, on February 16th 1977.

After the massed soldiers, arrayed there in front of diplomats and civil servants and religious leaders, had heard an accusation read out and, in response to a question from the Vice President, 'What shall we do with the traitors?' had yelled, 'kill them, kill them!' the Bishops, who had been standing out there on the concourse for two hours in the hot sun, were all ordered to wait in a side room in the conference centre. Janani had told Bishop Festo that he already knew from a girl who had come to warn him that he was top of the Security Forces hit list. He had told the girl that he could not escape and must stay. This determination of his was expressed yet again when, soon after he had mentioned this to Bishop Festo, a man came in and told them that President Amin wanted to see Janani in the next room. Festo put his hand on his arm and begged him not to go or at least to let Festo go with him. But Janani gently pushed his friend's hand away. 'Don't worry about me,' he said, 'I can see the hand of the Lord in this.' And he was gone, not to be seen in this life again.

I could picture it, could picture his face as Festo told the story. I knew that Janani was utterly at peace and sure of being in the Lord's will. This was the peace that he brought to others later that day, I have no doubt, when he blessed a whole cellful of fellow prisoners on their way to death, in that dreadful State Research Centre. This was the peace in which he prayed aloud for his murderers before he was shot.

### Anglican ambiguities

This is the heart, the central theme of the amazing words from St John's gospel, that I was given for my text when I was invited to speak to you on the occasion of this launching of the Centre for Anglican Communion Studies. And it points to that essential motif in the story of Janani which alone can explain the miracle of his peace and steadfastness. He had, as he put it to me 'handed over' his life to God, and continued daily to surrender himself to him. And it is out of such a surrender that any of our lives, our communities, our institutions alone can bear fruit. That is why it is described in that terrible and frightening phrase as 'hating our life', 'a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything'.... This is a hard saying. Who can hear it?

And yet it speaks to the strangely ambiguous feelings that I have and I hope the students and lecturers of the Centre will have in response to the notion of Anglicanism. Like all our inheritances from the mixed and shadowed history of the Church it is a vessel containing a strange fusion of what

is richly good and nourishing combined with what is alas sinful and has a bitter aftertaste.

Of its riches, past and present, there can be no doubt. Brought into being by a series of political accidents, from a divorce on the one hand to a violent alternation from one extreme to the other, in the brief and unhappy reigns of two mercifully short-lived monarchs, the richest quality of the settlement which gradually emerged was that it could offer, through its finest embodiments, just a touch, a rare breath of a humane sanity and wholeness, somehow welling up from deep springs, arising beyond the rigid and fanatical extremes on either side of the reformation/counter-reformation divide, beyond even the much earlier destructiveness of the separation between East and West, and so conveying, at moments at least, hints of the ultimate wholeness of some kind of coming great church.

Perhaps this possibility was best preserved up until today by the very fact that no *one* faction or party was ever, for long, able to secure enough power to force the whole Church to conform to the identity which each passionately wanted it to have. It refused to be made wholly puritan, then wholly Laudian, then wholly latitudinarian or high or low, evangelical or eventually Anglo-Catholic or liberal. At certain seemingly frustrating and destructive moments each emphasis has always had to yield place to others, within not only a diocese or a parish or a province, not only the Church of England or even the Anglican communion, but also within the breast of many an individual Anglican, finding within themselves a startling interplay between all these differing and conflicting stances!

What can make sense of this bizarre heritage, woven out of strange strands of establishment and state church; of passionate resistances, protestant and catholic in turn, to 'national apostasy'; then out of a deadening colonialism redeemed in turn by a constant, thin, fiery line of passionate opponents of colonialism, both expatriate missionaries and prophetic apostles of independence and freedom and justice?

### **A church apt for death**

I believe here our text draws us back to the one central thread running through and beyond all denominations and communions, from the first to the last. Only where they have given birth to those who were able to 'hand over' their hearts and lives and wills to the everlasting God, and to die to themselves, have they had a lasting meaning. Only when they have nurtured those who could enter, through their denominational heritage and by their particular and given path, into the way through all the ways, into the 'way of the cross' and so of 'true resurrection', have these fragments become valid. Only the saints, martyrs and confessors of the Anglican Communion, known to us or unknown, make sense of something called Anglicanism and offer us a sufficient reason for studying and exploring the forces which, after all, shaped them.

I would go further.

Perhaps the real significance of the Anglican church lies in this, that it is

of all denominations, the most obviously provisional, the most apt for death, or indeed, as I must then say, for life through death. This is a lesson it is slowly beginning to learn through its own inner dialectic, as each part finds out what it means to give way to and to receive from another part, catholic, liberal or evangelical, and as all parts that have sprung out of this most middle class and power-laden of churches are opened up to the true riches they can be given by the churches of the poor or the marginalised. These also we are blessed to have among us in the Anglican communion, almost everywhere. 'We are debtors to all, to all are we bounden....' We are the place where the streams of orthodoxy and catholicism and protestantism and pentecostalism, the streams even of those who espouse or who reject the ordination of women can meet and can discover at last that in the end they are going to need each other.

May this be the story of every Anglican, of every province, of every congregation, of every living and praying soul, not least through what the united churches of the Indian sub-continent already have to teach us! May we listen to them and learn from them humbly!

What we are left with is surely a 'way of the cross' which confronts us all and which must be the only ultimate destiny of Anglicanism itself. How do we arrive at the surrender and that 'giving over' of our lives and of our shared life to which the martyrs, such as Archbishop Janani point us?

We must pass through patterns of prayer and worship by means of which we can draw upon our whole heritage and the other inheritances of all those with whom we are bound up across the world. We must thus be drawn ourselves continually closer to Christ, deeper into his redemptive process ceaselessly at work in all things.

### The gifts of the Catholic Church

As an Anglican I was first brought nearer to this movement of the Spirit through Lutherans, who taught me to find in Christ forgiveness, and to begin to learn to live as a forgiven sinner, '*semper peccator, semper justus*'! From Roman and Anglo-Catholic friends I learnt then to strengthen this relationship through sacrament as well as through word; and from Pentecostals and charismatics to seek to be immersed in the Holy Spirit, which I then discovered was simply 'more of the same', more of being loved and forgiven, healed and released to serve. But infinitely greater scope was given me through my participating in new churches and movements in West and East Africa, and then through the challenge of radical Christians there and in Britain. Then came my deepest encounter with Asia and with *ashrams* and movements of discipleship among the contemplative and the poor in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. A retreat in an Eastern and Russian orthodox monastery led me to the 'Staretz' Archimandrite Sophrony, who has been my guide into the shallows and then the depths of the Jesus prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me', and so I am being gradually carried 'further out and further in' through that prayer into some kind of central stream of the Spirit. It becomes a rhythm which is at one with the mantras of Asia, the still

movement of Buddhist culture at its centre, and the joyful and passionately rhythmic beat of African repeated song, of the ecstatic lyrics of India or of Pakistan, or of the cadences of the haunting pipes of that infinitely evocative Amerindian music of the Americas. In Taize I find that many of these streams have likewise converged in a strangely Anglican way.

So again I begin to feel that through all the roots and subterranean interweavings we have been given as Anglicans we have the greatest encouragement into a constant movement down into the central root, up into the final goal, a movement 'into Christ'. In the end that is all that matters. 'In the evening of life we shall be judged' only by the extent to which we have let his love have its way in us.

This is the key, it may well be, to the place of the Christian church as a whole in the larger world of faiths, in the midst of which once again there can yet, in the twenty-first century, be a growing convergence on the figure of the Crucified.

### Life in the Crucified

Once Bishop Lakshman Wickremesinghe of Kurunegala presided over a communion amongst Buddhists, Hindus, Tamils and Christians of differing denominations all seeking to work for peace in his strife-torn country. He towered over us all, refined and austere. As he broke the bread and offered the cup, I was strangely reminded of Melchizedek, bringing forth gifts from beyond into the flux. Lakshman's fine face was absorbed, his form trance-like, his hands moved in the characteristic gestures of taking, giving thanks and breaking and distributing. He had spoken in a way which drew upon Buddhist and Hindu stories and legends and on the experience of the struggling poor of all faiths, the experience of humanity. His central action now seemed to affirm the reality of the infinite presence and power of God's love, released in the midst of our striving and pain in the most ordinary human and material form. Glancing at the faces round us there was no doubt anywhere that this essential brokenness of the God-Man on the cross undergirded and strengthened the hold of all of us upon faith and life and opened up for all a way through meaninglessness and death.

Somehow his very Anglican formation had brought him to this point where beyond all such temporary frameworks he could lead us all to embrace and be embraced by the mystery at the heart of all things, Christ, in whom once dying we shall live, with all those who have inspired us to follow, for ever.

**The Rt Revd Simon Barrington-Ward is Bishop of Coventry**