



31 October 2010
All Saints' Sunday
Choral Evensong
Ecclesiasticus 44 vv. 1–15
Revelation 19 vv. 6–10

Community

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Dean of Wells Cathedral

Last week I went on my regular visit to the sisters of the Community of St Mary the Virgin at Wantage. Once every three months I travel there to be available to sisters who want to talk about their lives – the grand title for what I am doing is spiritual direction – listening to what God is saying to individuals and to the corporate life of the convent.

I've been doing this for about six years, and it has been a period that has seen great change in the nature of the community. The sisters are ageing. There are no novices at the moment. Some of the sisters who face long-term illness can no longer be nursed in the infirmary of the convent and have gone to a nursing home in the town. The Community of St. Mary the Virgin is an active order and at one time undertook work in prisons, the probation service and orphanages, in England and in South Africa and India. Recently its last two pieces of external work have ceased; the school has amalgamated with another on a different site, the residential home for the elderly has been sold to a private company. It struggles with sizeable buildings dating from the mid-nineteenth century. But it has an astute and entrepreneurial Reverend Mother and has entered the internet age, offering retreats and meditations online and webcasting its daily worship – stiff competition for the chapel and choir here!

The history of the Community of St Mary the Virgin is reflected in many other religious orders, both Church of England and Roman Catholic. It seems that it is becoming harder and harder for people to live together within the traditional forms of monastic life. And yet there are still many people who want to go away for a time of retreat and quiet and to touch something of what the life of a community might mean. The television series 'The Monastery' which followed five people spending six weeks at Worth Abbey drew large audiences and changed the outlook of participants. Doubtless its successor 'The Big Silence' will have a similar appeal as a kind of religious antidote to Big Brother. We are fascinated by how people live together or fail to live together. There is no doubt that religious communities offer a strong sense of what the word community means. The stakes are very high when people commit themselves to a group of people and to God for their whole lives. Conflicts, anxieties, dependencies, projections, the absence of any sense of God, have to be acknowledged and worked through if people are to stay and ultimately flourish together.

In popular speech community has become a loose word. Generally it is felt to be something to be recommended, even yearned for. It gives us a sense of belonging to a greater whole. Tony Blair was a passionate advocate of community. He could say 'Community is where they know your name; and where they miss you if you're not there. Community is society with a human face.' But of course he could go on from this relatively narrow definition based on family or locality or work place to speak of the need for a national and even international community. The whole attempt by the previous government to create community cohesion rests on the assumption that there can be some sense of common belonging in a society where we do not meet face to face.

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But the networks that people inhabit become ever more complex. Wells, as some of you know, boasts a thriving cathedral school and we are becoming increasingly aware of the international links of students and their families. This is not only those whose parents live overseas but also the number of people whose parents come from different nations – say an English father and a Malaysian mother or a French father and an English mother. There are also plenty of parents whose work takes them for substantial periods to live elsewhere and who are in more regular virtual contact with clients across the globe than they are with neighbours in their own street. What is true of Wells, a relatively conservative town in Somerset will be happening much more rapidly for business men and women, and professionals in bigger cities across the globe.

Nevertheless, even if the extension of the notion of community beyond the immediacy of face to face contact seems to devalue its meaning, there still seems to be a longing in the human heart to draw closer to other people. We want to have a stable framework of social relationships as a base from which we interpret the world. One of the changes of the internet age is that that base may be made up of people living thousands of miles apart.

Communities demand ‘thick description’ to borrow the words of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. That is to say the rituals, beliefs, words and actions of members of a community need to be looked at from many different angles before the truth of what is happening in any given situation can begin to be described. Communities which have a religious belief as their central focus have particular ways of embodying faith in cultural practice.

My work in recent years has led me from parish life, to becoming the Principal of a theological college to the post of Dean in a cathedral. All of these three represent communities of different degrees of intensity. The church of St Mary’s Battersea on the south bank of the Thames was a strong mixture of families gathered from Battersea and Wandsworth and Clapham who enjoyed the open and outgoing character of St. Mary’s worship. Apart from meeting on Sundays or at other church activities, most of the people would not see each other during the week. When they came together and enacted community at worship and prayer and coffee there was a buzz. The news and events of the past week were shared. Children rediscovered each other and played together.

A theological college requires a much more intense belonging. Students come for two or three years. Married students live on site, most single students go elsewhere during vocations. In term time the combination of morning and evening prayer, study, placements, domestic duties and social events made for a rich sense of community. But there was always something forced in this hothouse because staff and students knew that this coming together was temporary, soon, people would move on, back to the supposedly real world of parish ministry. By the end of term – a couple of weeks longer than most university terms – staff and students were exhausted by the pace and complexity of life together.

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Cathedrals are another kind of community again. The older English cathedrals attract hundreds of thousands of visitors a year. They are renowned for their architecture and their music. They convey a sense of history and of the continuities of English life. To enable them to function requires a substantial number of paid staff and volunteers. In Wells, a medium-sized foundation, we have 75 paid staff, half full-time and half part-time and about 350 volunteers. At the centre of the web of the cathedral is the governing body, the Chapter, and they have to mediate between the different interests of those who have a stake in the organisation – staff, musicians, volunteers, congregations, the Bishop, the county, visitors, historians and conservationists and so on. Cathedrals are communities with a small core but which are very open to the wider world. A wise colleague described them to me, only part in jest, as a cross between a Benedictine monastery and an opera house.

Somewhere on this spectrum of community lies a college like this - a regularly changing group of students, a more stable community of Fellows and non-teaching staff, a surrounding group of friends and former students, strong interest in the college from many others, and not least in the life of this chapel and its music.

Creating a community with a religious foundation is much more than the face-to-face gathering of those who live there in the present. There are traditions of the reading of scripture, of prayer, of celebration of the sacraments that form the worship of the community and endure across generations. There are local customs that derive from the circumstances of place and history. And most importantly on this festival of all saints we remember that there is a history of those who have been part of the community before us. As Ecclesiasticus says 'let us now sing the praises of famous men (and indeed we might add women), our ancestors in their generation'. All Saints is perhaps a season when St John's remembers its founders such as Lady Margaret Beaufort and Bishop John Fisher and a galaxy of former students including William Wilberforce and Lord Palmerston, but the passage from Ecclesiasticus also recalls the importance of those who were part of the community but now no longer mentioned 'Some of them have left behind a name, so that others declare their praise. But of others there is no memory... but these were godly men whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten.'

Memory and remembering is one of the markers of community. This is a true even at the more disparate level of the community of a nation. To be English, is to be shaped by a dominant history that includes Chaucer, Elizabeth the first, William Shakespeare, Oliver Cromwell, Winston Churchill and many others known and unknown. To deepen an English identity is to see the contemporary diversity of cultures in England as somehow related to that past. Local communities, cathedrals and colleges have their more specific histories knowledge of which becomes a sign of belonging. The music of this chapel is a good example – a quick glance at this term's calendar suggests that to belong to this community will lead to familiarity with an international classical tradition that ranges from Byrd and Victoria to Messiaen and Jonathan Harvey.

A key word in community is incorporation. How are we brought into membership of a community and then allowed to make the particular contribution we can offer to its life recognising that because of us the community will in some small way have changed? How can we let the pulses of the community be taken into our bodies, felt within our own self-understanding?

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I started by talking about our yearning for community. And yet this age finds long-term belonging difficult whether it is to a convent, a political party or even the committed support of a local football team. Our memberships and our causes tend to be temporary, we say that we want to keep our options open. Despite the deep human yearning for community today many people suffer from isolation, lack friendships, or struggle with issues of mental health. We need to belong to something beyond ourselves, but we have lost the ability to just be with others, to find our identity in an organisation that endures over time and is based on the repetition of rituals.

There is an important strand in Judaeo-Christian thinking which sees every community as incomplete. Faith looks to the future for fulfilment. Community is not only derived from history or the markers of the past. It looks, as in tonight's reading from the book of Revelation to a future forever beyond this world, that time when we can say 'Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth'. For the faithful, for the followers of Jesus, this is not just illusion, for the foretaste of such hope is given in the present, when we live out a solidarity not based on human likeness, or shared history, but on the grace of God. This solidarity St. Paul termed *koinonia*, communion, the welcome of stranger and friend in all their otherness, their dissimilarity; a welcome just because they, like us, are a child of God.

Perhaps every earthly community, college, convent, cathedral or nation, is a striving after this common bond yet to be realised in full, a bond that is based on freely given love, even on suffering for the other person. The communion of saints that we celebrate this evening is a symbol and expression of the call to learn to live together in holiness of life. It challenges us to use our gifts for the benefit of the wider community of human kind. It challenges us to celebrate the gifts of others as of equal importance to our own. It challenges us to remember that whatever talents we have are not in the end our own possession but are to be received as gifts from God.

Some of the great heroes of prayer in the early church were the monks who lived in the Egyptian and Palestinian deserts in the first centuries of the Christian era. They showed in their austerity and generosity the radical inversion of values that would be required to build this community of self-giving, the communion of saints whose roots are in heaven. Here to end my sermon is a story of one of them. I hope that it speaks to you on your particular path of faith.

'Some robbers once came to a hermitage and said, 'We've come to take everything out of your cell.' The hermit said, 'Take whatever you see, my sons.' So they took what they found in the cell and went away. But they missed a little bag that was hidden in the cell. The hermit picked it up, and ran after them, shouting, 'My sons, you missed this; take it.' They were amazed at his patience and restored everything, and did penance to him. They said to each other, 'Truly this is a man of God.'