

Fel Na Choller Dim ❖ That Nothing Be Lost

A Conversation to Preserve the Breadth of Welsh Anglicanism

21-22 September 2016

Reflection on the Welsh Situation

by the Revd Ben Rabjohns

In order to reflect on the ‘Welsh Situation’, as it is called in the programme, I first wanted to say something about the situation of the Church in Wales as a whole and not just a particular group within it. And that is to say that we face difficult and challenging times – not because of debates about any particular issues or because of threats of disunity or splits within our part of the Church – but because we live in times where the need to reach out with the message of the Gospel to so many people is urgent, and where, for many of those whom we seek to reach, it will be the first time they have heard that Good News.

I’d like to say first of all that I am excited, even though daunted, to be part of a generation which needs to meet this particular challenge; and I would also like to say that it is without hesitation or reservation that I want to do so as part of the Church in Wales. I can only speak personally, and wouldn’t presume to speak for those who share my reservations about the ordination of women as priests and bishops, or anyone else for that matter, but I love the Church in Wales. It is the place where I learnt my faith; it is the place where I came to know and learned to love Jesus Christ; it is the place where I have experienced His love and grace in Word and Sacrament and in the love of my fellow Christians; it is, I believe, the expression of Christ’s Body, the Church, in and for this land and its people – and therefore a place where others, as I have done, can encounter and know Jesus Christ and learn to love Him.

So, it is in that context that I would like to speak about the ‘Welsh Situation’ for those of us who are unable to accept the ordination of women as priests and bishops and to think about how those of us who think in this way might be provided for in a way which means that we are a valued part of the Church in Wales, and that we are enabled to flourish within it and contribute to its life and mission. My hope is that putting it in this context shows that I am not talking about a desire to put our heads in the sand and pretend that things which we don’t like or don’t agree with haven’t happened, nor a desire to inhabit a Church which is just as we want it to be (though wouldn’t it be so much easier if we could all do that?)

Now I’m going to have to be a bit negative for a moment and say that the situation in the Church in Wales for those of us who have doubts about the ordination of women is not good. We have moved from a situation where, when I went through the process of selection for ordination, there was a Provincial Assistant Bishop, whose task was the pastoral and spiritual care of those of us opposed to the ordination of women and whose ministry did speak to us of our valued place within the Church in Wales and gave us the opportunity to feel secure and to flourish.

Now, there has been no replacement Provincial Assistant Bishop since his retirement eight years ago and legislation has been passed allowing women to be ordained as bishops accompanied by a Code of Practice which, whilst it speaks about the value and flourishing of

each person within the Church in Wales, actually offers no security or certainty to those of us who would be unable to receive their sacramental ministry. And, because it offers neither security or certainty, I would argue that it cannot offer a place within the Church in Wales for us to flourish. Alternative episcopal ministry is spoken about in the Code of Practice as being provided to individuals on the occasions when it is needed – which actually reduces episcopal ministry to those occasions; and, I believe, episcopal ministry isn't just about those occasions when it is needed but is an every-day reality and every-day need within the Church. It is no less than the source from which ministry in the Church flows and by which it is nourished and to which, especially priestly ministry, looks.

For those of us who cannot accept the ordination of women as bishops to flourish (not just to survive) we need more security than just a promise that a bishop of the right gender will turn up on the occasions when we need their ministry. We need the acknowledgement that the episcopal ministry is something which we need each and every day of our Christian lives, and the security that this daily ministry is one which we can rely on with confidence and in good conscience.

Now, I realise that this is a lot to ask and that it will be an uncomfortable and costly thing for those who believe that I, and others, are wrong about this issue to provide. I realise that to say my position on this issue is a valued and accepted one within the Church in Wales and that people who think as I do should be allowed not just to exist but to flourish within the Church in Wales will be hard for those who believe that I am deeply and badly wrong. But it's important to be honest. And I believe, I hope, that I have been honest about the situation in which I and others find ourselves within the Church in Wales and why the provision offered as it currently stands is inadequate for us to feel secure, be valued and allowed to flourish.

I don't for a moment want to suggest that those who say they want us to stay within the Church in Wales and have a place within its structures are dishonest or do not mean what they say – I know that people genuinely do not want to see people like me unable to remain within the life of the Church in Wales. But if the message from the Church in Wales as a whole is to be that we are not just to be allowed to remain but valued, not just be unthreatened but be secure and allowed to flourish, then some provision which really demonstrates this and allows it needs to be offered.

As I have already said, I know this will not be something which is comfortable. But it's important to say again that neither I nor others are simply looking for a place to be comfortable, unthreatened, able to ignore the decision of the Church in Wales to ordain women as priests and bishops. We simply look for the space, in good conscience, to be alongside those with whom we disagree, to rejoice in our mutual flourishing, to be made uncomfortable by our disagreements but also to work together above and beyond them, as best we can, as all of us seek to discern the will of God in this for His whole Church, not just for the Church in Wales.

The flourishing of all within the Church in Wales will not mean that all will be comfortable, or that all will feel that the Church is exactly as they want it to be. But it will, I believe, serve God's greater will – that the Good News of His love may be heard and known by the people whom we are called to serve. If we are able to find a way for all to flourish, and learn to rejoice in one another's life and full flourishing, I believe and hope that together we will be able to meet that even greater challenge which faces us: to reach out with the message of God's love and ensure that, in the Church in Wales, the people of our generation can encounter the living Jesus, know his love and learn to love Him.