



Looking Out My Window, April 29, 2022

Jaroslav Pelikan, a Lutheran church historian, once quipped: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead: traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” [Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven, CN: Yale UP, 1984), p. 65.] I once got a unique look at a parish that maintained an unusual tradition (or was it traditionalism?).

In 2005 I worshipped at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Hamilton, Scotland, a small town just north of Glasgow. The Rev. Dr. David Jasper, a professor of theology and literature at The University of Glasgow and my host, was serving as an unpaid assistant priest there. His wife, Alison, was a professor of cultural studies at Stirling University. I house sat for David and Alison for almost a month while they traveled with their twin daughters.

The vicar, Ian Barcroft, had served St. Mary’s ten years at that point. Ian is an energized, personable individual with a progressive spirit. His spouse, Heather, and his two daughters are delightful people. Ian led this parish to make the passing of the peace an important aspect of worship. I do not know their attendance numbers now, but then they were a pastoral size parish with average attendance around 100 in the peak seasons but lower in the summer. At least ten people left their seats at the peace to greet me. Ian made it all the way down the center aisle and around to my side. The warmth and energy felt much like I had become accustomed to in the new church start I was serving as start-up priest in the Richmond, VA metro area.

Now for the traditionalism. Hamilton had been a military post, and St. Mary’s, a parish primarily for soldiers in the beginning. The pews were constructed on the assumption that soldiers sit at attention. And, the farther back one goes in the nave the narrower the bottoms of the pews. Officers sat nearer the front and enlisted personnel nearer the back, hence the progressively narrower pew bottoms. I’ve never experienced more uncomfortable seats.

Ian had been seeking to lead them to modify their seating but meet entrenched resistance. And that from people who endure the “rack” every Sunday. He was committed to continuing the discussion. It’s one thing to love the tradition and history of the parish. It’s another to be so caught in it that pews that no longer serve the needs of the parish survive because of their link to the church’s traditional past.

Now that we’ve completed Holy Conversations and are doing the Holy Cow survey, Christ Church has an open door to revisioning our identity, informed by the past but seeking to allow future possibilities to pull us forward, not a desire to recapture the past. We can feel free to “change the pews” as it were if Spirit pulls us there.

God’s peace,

David W. Perkins

David W Perkins+, Interim Rector

PS: I was back visiting the David and Alison in the summer of 2018. They now have retired. After my visit they relocated in Glasgow. Ian still was at St. Mary’s. Prior that second visit, they had added a delightful community coffee house and meeting area for public use. And, yes, the pews still were the same.