



Does Distance Make the Heart Grow Fonder?

From the Editor

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When Paul was run out of Thessalonica and travelled south to Athens he left behind a new and struggling Christian community. Not long afterwards he wrote that he could 'bear it no longer' and so was sending his close colleague Timothy back to Thessalonica with a letter that we know as 1 Thessalonians. Later he wrote in similar terms to the Corinthians and sent Silas, not Timothy. These little incidents show among other things that distance changed the character of relating between people but did not remove the relationship. The truth is evident throughout human history, from the papyri of the ancient world of Paul's time to the present day. In the century before Paul the Roman poet Sextus Propertius declared in one of his elegies, 'Always toward absent lovers, love's tide stronger flows'. We know this aphorism in modern English as 'absence makes the heart grow fonder'. Another side of this aspect of the human condition is the sadness that separation brings. The earliest usage of the term 'nostalgia', according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is in the journal kept by James Thacher during the American War of Independence where he reports 'many perplexing instances of indisposition ... called by Dr Cullen *nostalgia* or homesickness'.¹ It was a term often used in relation to expatriates serving in the far-flung reaches of the empire.

The patterns of relating between individuals and groups over distance are almost infinitely complex and layered. When my ancestors came from Kent in the south of England, almost certainly against the wishes of their parents, and settled in New South Wales in 1838 their contact with the family 'back home' was complicated not only by the previous relationship and distance but also by the terms of their parting. When I went to England in 1966 the ocean voyage took nearly 30 days. Now it can be done in less than 24 hours and I can have a

1. James Thacher, *A Military Journal during the American Revolutionary War from 1775 to 1783. ... To Which Is Added an Appendix, Containing Biographical Sketches of Several General Officers* (Boston, MA, 1823).

video teleconference on Skype with friends anywhere in the world. Each step in technology has changed the effect of distance on our relationships.

These changes have been so dramatic in this generation that it would be easy to imagine that the effect of distance has been effectively eliminated. But this would be a serious misunderstanding of our situation. It is a very different thing to walk away in disagreement from someone who lives day by day in the same community as you do than it is to hang up on the telephone or send an email knowing that you can choose not to see them again. You may not even have ever met them face to face. Even our ultra efficient technology, if you are fortunate to have it available to you, does not provide the interconnections and ties that bind us to our local community and shape who we are.

The talk of living in a global village, so popular thirty years ago, is just the contemporary form of the excitement at the reduction of the previous barriers to communication created by distance. It was a very intense excitement not only because the changes had been so dramatic but also because our interconnectedness is so important in our humanity. For the Christian this interconnectedness is even more important because the very terms of our faith are cast in categories of all belonging to Christ. We are bound together not only by a common humanity but by the gospel virtue of love which expresses the very character of God.

Having dealt with the conflicts in Corinth and asserted that diversity arises from the gifts each has from God Paul tells them that the more excellent way to approach such diversity and potential conflict is to shape their relationships according to this virtue of love. Faith and hope point to their belonging to God and to their expectations in life, but the greatest and most enduring truth that should shape their ecclesial life is love. He recognizes that in a situation of diversity and conflict in the church community love reveals the heart of God in a way that the body image could not do, helpful though it may be.

A number of important issues flow from this observation and touch on the local and the distant in understanding the community character of Christian faith. It highlights why the local and neighbourly is always the primary focus for ecclesial life and the experience of Christian faith. The bodily presence in ecclesial relationships is fundamental and provides the immediate context for both forgiveness and restitution. But this local priority is not enough since it is not only capable of the intense and immediate expression of the gospel, it is also susceptible to the corruption of that local context in which the

church seeks to be Christian. The Corinthian Christians to whom Paul wrote were in real danger of being corrupted by the social and ethnic attitudes which they brought into their ecclesial relationships from their contemporary world. It is therefore a very natural expression of this same gospel that connections with other Christian fellowships should emerge and provide that diversity of local experience which would enable the local to be protected from itself and its world. The pattern of those fellowship relations have varied infinitely in the history of Christianity and even within the different broad traditions of faith that inevitably emerged in the course of time. The universal jurisdictional claims of the Roman Catholic tradition during the last millennium have in principle not been much different from the locally circumscribed claims to uniformity and jurisdictional monopoly in the Church of England, particularly in the two centuries after the Reformation. Nor indeed in the kinds of jurisdictional enclaves established in Europe following the Treaty of Westphalia. *Cuius regio cuius religio* is really a form of territorially located imperialism. Richard Hooker found the barriers between nations to be so great that he gave up on any development of a sense of catholicity that reached across these borders. All of this is a far cry from the kind of catholicity that emerged in the early Church.

There is another aspect of this distance/local dynamic. The kind of authority that can be exercised locally where there are effective proximate relationships can be more persuasive and personal than is the case when authority is exercised at a distance. Such distant authority must necessarily rely upon other more obviously organizational and jurisdictional types of power.² The experience of the Royal Supremacy and the Acts of Uniformity in the Church of England has left for Anglicans, both in England and elsewhere, a very ambiguous heritage. On the one hand it has left them with a strong sense of the national over against the universal and at the same time it has also left an underlying sense of uniformity within the national or regional as a way of thinking about the inter-connectedness and coherence of the church. Body thinking can so easily triumph over love. The ambiguities of this heritage can be seen both in recent Anglican ecclesiologies and also in the *realpolitik* of Anglican relations around the world. In this we can see that distance not only can make

2. This was part of the anxiety of Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1877), as he observed the combination of the German states into a greater Germany.

the heart grow fonder, it can also diminish the restraining effect of personal space in relationships and facilitate difference growing into hostility and conflict.

Underlying these issues is also the endemic challenge of Christians and Christian groups to relate to the actual context in which they live. Just as it is easy for the immediate to cloud our vision, so also is it true that the conception of the distant can cloud our vision of the proper place of the distant. This question is central to the operation of a dynamic catholicity in the church and also of an effective sense of Christ's kingdom not being of this world.

It is not only interesting, but revealing, that the emergence of ideas about how the distant in Anglicanism should be thought about occurred at the same time as the triumphant heirs of free trade revived after the Second World War and were unleashed at the end of the Cold War. In the world around us the distant was being brought closer and thought of in terms which discounted and often demonized the local.

Transnational corporation spanned the world. ... the process of globalization was continuing relentlessly. But at the same time there was evidence of rising demand for regional autonomy, decay of superpower influence, and the growth of new social movements seeking to find ways of expressing themselves politically outside the boundaries of mainstream politics.³

This could easily be a description of the struggle in the Anglican Communion and as such points to a fundamental question for Anglicans engaged in this struggle. How far are the solutions we offer simply a form of conformity to the image of this world? How to live in the world while having a citizenship that is in heaven is crucial to understanding any notion of Anglican identity in our generation and almost certainly shapes the way in which a variety of warrants, such as Scripture or tradition, are deployed in arguments.

Open reasoned discussion of these underlying theological concerns is part of the mission of the *Journal of Anglican Studies* to promote scholarly conversation on all aspects of Anglicanism from all points of view. This issue of the *Journal* points to some specific locations in Anglicanism where these dynamics are at work. Gerald West points to the crucial role of context in interpreting Scripture and the experience of empire present and distant. John Tyers deals with a local controversy

3. J. Camilleri and J. Falk, *The End of Sovereignty: The Politics of a Shrinking and Fragmenting World* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1992), p. vii.

about the revival of retreats and their perceived connection with a more distant tradition of Roman practice. Duncan Reid highlights the significance of the ordination of women for ecumenical relations with Orthodox churches. Matthew Lagrone draws attention to local diversity in the Church of England and Matthew Arnold's attempts to imagine patterns of coherence and connectedness in the church community. Lastly Christopher Byaruhanga tells the story of Florence Spetume Njangali and her ministry in Uganda. It is a tale of great pain and resilience and resonates with the experience of other women in Anglican churches around the world. It brings to us a struggle of patience and hope as well as prejudice and imagination. These are stories, arguments and history which enable us to better perceive the dynamics of Anglicanism.