

Canon Is Not Enslavement: A Personal and Pastoral Essay

Fr Edward Wagner

Fr Wagner is the pastor and rector of his home parish, St George's in Owen Sound. Served in parish ministry for 40 years as a priest and precentor (minister of music), and as an oncology and hospice chaplain, most recently as co-director of pastoral care for all eleven hospitals in Grey and Bruce counties. Educated at the University of Waterloo, Ontario (Hons BA, MA), Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut (MDiv), and St Joseph's College, West Hartford, Connecticut (MA)

Abstract

Sees the issues addressed by the Windsor and St Michael Reports as fundamentally issues of brokenness requiring divine healing. Attempts to make a case for Biblical inerrancy in the broadest sense. Argues for the pastoral necessity of a closed Canon and Biblical inerrancy, defined as "complete truthfulness and dependability of all that scripture affirms" (Barnes, 1993); but proposes that inerrancy be located in the believing communities, rather than the text itself. The model suggested for this is "God speaks; humankind responds." Humankind responds first by worship, then by formation of holy communities, then (much later) by scripture (and theology). Argues that locating inerrancy in the interpretations of the "individual Spirit-filled communities" gives both freedom and necessary security to believers. Pleads for a generous, pastoral reading of the canon, one that allows us to disagree—if disagree we must—in love; and if parting there must be, it will be the hope filled parting of family.

Letter from a Friend

This is part of a letter I received:

As to whether there is a God/Creator/Presence whatever one chooses to call this Being, "yes", I believe that there is such a Being, otherwise there would be no order in the Universe(s). And "yes", I do believe that Jesus, a wonderful man, was crucified, after trying to show people how to love one another. Is the resurrection story true, I don't know. I do believe that the essence of goodness is to found in each of us and certainly, Jesus was a perfect person, whom we all strive to be like.

But to believe that there is a God, who is presented the way Christians present him is in my opinion, foolish. How could a loving God/Father do such terrible things to his "children"? And how can people say that when a terrible thing happens to someone, it is "God's will".

For the past few years I have been doing a lot of reading and pondering these questions and feeling like a heretic because I cannot go along with what I have been taught for years-- that the Bible is the irrefutable "word of God". I have read books by a number of modern thinkers like Tom Harpur in the "Pagan Christ" (in which there were many quotes by great thinkers); the novel, "The Da Vinci Code" (maybe some truths here), and a book called "The Hiram Key" by Christopher Knight and Robert Lomas, and a yet-to-be-read book, by the same authors, entitled "Uriel's Machine". I have also read several books on spirituality and the after life. I do also find interesting the writings about the ancient Essenes, Egyptians, Incas, Mayans, Aztecs and our own native peoples. There is so much to read and discover and I for one am crying out for answers as to why the world is the way it is today and what is the answer to making it better.

The writer is a retired professional who has spent significant time in non-Christian countries and recalls how dangerous it can be to meet in Sunday Christian assembly in those places; a parish pillar who has suffered graciously through not one, but several great tragedies; and thus in my mind has earned the right to be taken seriously.

I think matters of faith are ultimately undebatable, and I said that in my written reply. It seemed to me that if I offered a learned disquisition—however gently expressed-- on Tom Harpur or Dan Brown or the Jesus Seminar—I would only add fuel to a pointless fire. I said to my correspondent that we have both suffered more than our share of life's miseries, that what we've experienced has sent us in different directions, and that while we do not agree, I respect what a lifetime of living and learning have taught. I sent the reply with assurance of my love.

My letter-writer stands with a host of good Christian people throughout the world who have thumped up against The Bible. For such Christians, the entire sweep of the Bible as it presently stands, replete with the angry Yahweh who burns up sinners and seems—despite occasional exasperated denials-- to revel in the mass slaughter of animals, is repulsive. The connection between Yahweh and Jesus is pretty much a spiritual impossibility, "Christ" and "Son of God" and even "Lord" now-empty concepts once foisted upon us by ignorant and savage ancients.

This corner of the Christian world usually stands opposed to the Bible-thumpers who condemn practicing homosexuals to Hell. Their hearts cry out for the miserable, the ones who suffer, the apparent victims of the thundering old Judger of the Old Testament—the God, let it be said, that fundamentalist Christians, Biblical inerrantists all, use as a weapon against their enemies.

But common wisdom knows the Bible thumpers are mostly caricature. For many Christians here in the Western Church especially, the issue of same-sex unions and the ordination of practicing gay, lesbian—and maybe soon transgendered—persons is a heart-rending, mind-bending epic struggle. For these Christians, Christian same-sex marriage and the ordination of practicing homosexuals is by definition impossible. At their most anguished, they must finally say, "Here I stand-- God help me, I can do no other."

We can no longer pretend that Christians across the world are not deeply, viscerally divided now over Biblical authority and same-sex blessings and ordinations. We've reached the fight-or-flight stage, and a lot of us just plain don't like each other. One of my counselling mentors says, "How does that client smell to you?" Well, Christians these days are sniffing the air, and finding stink among their opponents. We try to be polite with one another. But the not-for-publication murmurs of "brain dead" when the neo-Orthodox gather in an Essentials convention, or the smug grins when national polls show yet another decline in mainline church attendance, all point to the same thing: We're right. You're wrong. And, too often, we choose to forget that the Way of Christ demands that if we must disagree, we disagree in love.

As someone who grew up in the Church and never left it, as a parish minister with forty years of experience, as a former pastoral counselor who specialized in couples therapy, as an orthodox Christian who has been a chaplain in the Order of St Luke for some 15 years, I interpret what's presently happening in the Body of Christ pastorally, using a humanly-inflected Biblical theology. Bluntly put, I see the world-wide Anglican communion so sinfully fractured now that

at least a functional divorce is all but inevitable. As in any divorce, there's a process, and negotiating begins even before the bravest partner throws down the gauntlet and at last comes right out with it—"OK. It's over. I want the kids and the house." That's what I think the St Michael and Windsor Reports are—fine pastoral and theological documents, Godly in conception, cogently argued, but attempts nevertheless towards making a deal most of us can live with as the divorce becomes a reality.

The bonds of affection are frayed, tattered and torn; and with feelings running this high even the clearest, most sensible thinking can be infuriating. So like the marriage counselor that I still am, my intention here is not to force a change in anybody's mind. Rather, I want to offer what—God willing—might be a channel of grace, a meditation and a benediction that points to an ultimate hope and healing in Christ. Perhaps what I say here is a prayer that all of us experiencing this impending divorce may go into the process humbly, like that father of the epileptic boy whom Jesus healed and his disciples couldn't-- "I believe—oh, help my unbelief!"

The Two Horses

As both the Windsor and St Michael Reports assert and demonstrate, the Biblical witness, the written Word of God, is the foundation of the Anglican theological enterprise. Hooker gave us the famous Anglican three-legged stool—scripture, tradition, reason; but even he conceded that Scripture has primacy of place. As a son of the evangelical Diocese of Huron, as one trained by divines in succession to the New England puritans of the seventeenth century, and as one who

was Minister of Word and Sacrament among New England Presbyterians for a decade, I am a modern Biblical inerrantist, a priest and pastor who believes that "Holy Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation" and who is convinced of the "complete truthfulness and dependability of all that scripture affirms" (Barnes, 1993).

But I am also an artist, a professional church musician of long standing, who like most artists is always kicking at the goads of what is routine and conventional and commonly accepted. I was the one who refused to attend seminary until I was 28, and then didn't seek ordination until I was 33. I indeed understood my former neighbour, a dancer and a cradle Episcopalian who rarely attends church any more, when he sighed in exasperation, "But the same old Bible and the same old liturgy—aren't you *bored* yet?"

One of the things I've learned as a pastor and a counselor is that Plato's metaphor of the two horses is true to life. One horse wants to pull into new worlds and the other wants to stay grounded. Plato talks of *Eros* and *Agape*. I understand the two horses as fundamental spiritual impulses, as urges to creative chaos and urges to orderly security.

The human imperative is to control the horses so that they pull as a team. Looking at Scripture, we have the urge to "God said it; I believe it; that settles it;" and the urge to take the canon of Scripture as we know it and explode it the way the Jesus Seminar has so infamously done.

How, for example, does one handle this conundrum? Jesus says, "Not a single iota of the law shall pass away until all has been fulfilled" (Matt 5.18). He also says, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk 2.25).

For some people, "canon" is the red flag in front of the bull. Some people are constitutionally revolted by the idea of boundaries to thought and feeling. Some of us seem to be made by God to push the boundaries all our lives, while some of us seem to be made by God to spend our lives tending the gardens within the fences somebody else erects for us. But even the most insistent boundary-pushers seem to want and need to settle down some time, and even the most content garden-tenders seem to long for excitement. Boundary-pushers and garden-tenders may never be completely comfortable with one another this side of Heaven, but to be healthy human beings in this world, they need to keep both their horses pulling as a team.

Still, isn't it probable that garden-tenders will choose "Not a single iota shall pass away" as inerrant Gospel for them, while "The Sabbath was made for man" will become inerrant Gospel for boundary-pushers? In the process of defining a personal Scriptural canon, do we dismiss one maxim as just another of those things that Jesus didn't really say, and cling to the other just because it fits our own prejudices better?

The person who wrote the letter I quoted said in another part of it, "Many feel the same as I do." Surely many Canadian Anglicans could be counted among those whom we might consider modern-day Marcionites.

Yet look who's growing. Believer Christian, Muslim and Jewish assemblies—all of whom live under the constraints of their closed scriptural canons—are overflowing, while post-believer assemblies, the ones who take the Tom Harpurs and the Dan Browns seriously, are thinning out

fast. Do we take the position that post-believers are more highly spiritually evolved than believers? And how does the post-believer answer the challenge of the believer who dies nobly for the faith, filled with the inspired eloquence of Holy Scripture and confident of its teaching?

As a Biblical inerrantist, I would argue that rarely is the universal impulse to regularize and systematize sacred materials into scripture a cynical attempt by powerful men to lord it over ignorant believers, or somehow to tame the holy. I believe that regularizing and systematizing are inherently human instincts, just as surely as it is inherent human instinct to break open again what is regular and systematic. In our Judeo-Christian world, the post-Exilic and post-Apostolic passion for Bible-making was natural and necessary. So, too, is Holy Spirit's insistence on keeping things fresh by constantly churning through what has been canonically settled.

Ultimately, though, I believe our need for order and security trumps our need for creative chaos. With so few exceptions that they prove the rule, everybody dreams of loving someone who will love them back for ever, everybody wants to have a family who will never turn them away, everybody hopes for at least one unconditionally loving friend to count on for a lifetime.

That is the longing, the need, the want, the hope that the Judeo-Christian Bible has filled for 2600 years. The written Word of God is the constant North Star of our belief in the goodness of God, the truth of His Son, the power of Holy Spirit. No wonder boundary-pushers and garden-tenders alike pore over it, embrace it and fight with it.

Canon, I believe, closed Canon at that, is a spiritual necessity. Biblical inerrancy—trusting in the Bible as it presently stands (with or without Apocrypha)—is likewise a spiritual necessity. They're foundational. Whether we embrace them or fight them, they provide the structural security of faith that both boundary-pushers and garden-tenders desperately need in a fallen world.

Reinstituting the Tapestry

Biblical inerrancy as we now commonly understand it is a relatively new concept. In its present form, it arose among Nineteenth Century Protestant fundamentalists. It insists that every word of the Protestant Bible—that is, the Bible without the Apocrypha-- is indisputably the very Word of God. Every dogmatic, doctrinal, theological and personal issue can be settled by study of the words of the Bible, every one of which is absolute truth, dictated by God Godself.

This form of Biblical inerrancy has been rendered so intellectually thin and delivered so abusively by Protestant polemicists that it has lost virtually all credibility as the Church debates issues of Biblical authority.

But Biblical inerrancy swells the grand river of orthodox Biblical criticism even now. If inerrancy can be understood to mean "complete truthfulness of all that Scripture affirms," then inerrancy is a mainstream theology that traces its roots at least to the Rabbis of the 5th Century BCE and continues through Jesus Christ and the apostles, the Mediaeval Scholastics, the great

Reformers of the 16th Century, and Bishop Tom Wright today. The Jesus Seminar's failure to thrive beyond the academy, the cultured despisers and the shrinking left wing of the Western Church shows just how stubbornly orthodox most Christians are.

I said that for most human beings, the need for security trumps the need for creative chaos. Nowhere does that seem more true than among ordinary practicing Christians. Broadly considered, the majority of Western people-in-the-pew, including the majority of Anglicans anywhere in the world, are not inerrantists in the Protestant fundamentalist sense. They will talk, perhaps, of the "inspiration" of Scripture, of its being "God-breathed" into the minds of *human* writers. On the other hand, they will staunchly uphold the authority of scripture in their lives and in the Church. One cannot place oneself under the authority of scripture without trusting the truth of Scripture—which ultimately must be understood as an inerrantist position, however that position might be nuanced.

In other words, I believe that majority, mainstream contemporary Christians, including Anglicans, are all, to some degree or another, orthodox in faith and practice, and functionally Biblical inerrantists. Furthermore, I believe even skeptical Christians like my letter-writer are reacting to the mystic power of Scripture esteemed as inerrant.

Given the power of Scripture esteemed as inerrant, problems have always arisen when our pastors in their teaching ministry attempt—as they must and should—"rightly to explain the word of truth" (2 Tim 2.15). The King James Version of this passage is engraved on the cornerstone of Renison College in Waterloo, Ontario, where generations of students and

teachers have puzzled over "rightly *dividing* the word of truth"—ironically, exactly that to which "rightly explaining" often leads. Wars have been fought over the precise meaning of individual words of scripture, and when you visit a certain famous New England college town, and you find a First Congregational Church and a Second Congregational Church right beside one another, you're not surprised.

"Dividing" is what happens when you locate truth in the scriptural text itself. Individual inspired teachers become convinced of an interpretation, gather loyal followers, and oppose themselves to other Christians who are convinced otherwise. Each side holds in common a text, but disagrees on its interpretation.

"Canon" is both a process and a result. For Christians, the canon of Scripture becomes more-or-less fixed during the 4th Century CE. The Hebrew canon had become more-or-less fixed by the 6th Century BCE. But "the Bible" as we know it in the West is really an invention of the moveable-type printing press of 15th century Europe, and promulgated by the Protestant reformers. Before printed Bibles, there were hand-lettered manuscripts, all of them subject to at least minor variation of text at the hands of copyists. And before there was a fixed canon of Hebrew and Christian Scripture, there were manuscripts all over the Hebrew and Christian worlds, differently collected by different believing communities and esteemed as (probably inerrant) Scripture. The continuing Apocrypha controversies are a reminder that the canonizing process continues into the present day.

I want to suggest that everyone gets into difficulty when scripture, gathered into The Bible, is seen to be “revelation in the deep-freeze--” in its present form and text “inerrant” in the narrowly Protestant fundamentalist form.

Consider the patriarch Abraham. Did he meet YHWH by reading Scripture? Did he "go from his country and his kindred and his father's house to the land that God will show him" because the Bible told him to? Genesis 12 says Abram "went, as the Lord had told him." The Lord *spoke* to Abram—by speaking, YHWH had entered into relationship with Abram.

We can fairly assume that there was no Scripture for Abraham to study. We can fairly assume he was untroubled by questions of canon, inerrancy and Biblical authority. He just heard God speak, listened, set off whence he knew not—and became, as God promised, the father of a great nation, whose very name is still a blessing to Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Genesis 12, and what we know of the complex process of Scriptural canonization, suggest an ancient model for hearing and receiving God's Word. It may be described this way:

1. God speaks, humankind responds,
and a relationship between Creator and Creature begins;

|

2. As the relationship develops, Holy Spirit
leads the Creature to worship the Creator, and make community with others who share
a similar conversation;

|

3. From the conversation of worship
comes the need for the Creature, inspired by Holy Spirit, to record and codify the conversation.

This, I would argue, is both the primal and the primary model of God's relationship with humankind. Its essential elements are relational and liturgical, not scriptural. Scripture is born of the Liturgical conversation, and grows out of it, but Spirit-filled Liturgy remains its life-giving root. I would further argue that scripture, rooted and grounded in liturgy, has no life of its own outside the believing, practicing, Spirit-filled community in active relationship—"conversation"-- with God.

I can imagine that once, before King Josiah and Ezra and Calvin and Luther and all their tribe, there was a rich tapestry of local canon and textual inerrancy (broadly understood) among Jews and Christians. But what is rich tapestry to some is to others chaos that must be tamed.

Like the partners in a breaking marriage, we Anglicans have entered a period of creative chaos. What we have to decide, if we wish to remain in community with one other, is how we're going to manage this period of chaos. Do we loose the reins or pull them tighter?

As Anglicans, we are heirs of the Protestant reformation of the 16th Century. So much blood and brain in those days spent in taming doctrinal, theological and political chaos! The instrument of order? The Bible, first a trickle and then a river of printed words of God.

And the price? What the printing press did, especially for Protestants, was sever scripture from its root. The written Word of God, now separated from the Spirit-filled liturgical community centered upon the *enacted* Word, becomes in some hands an idol. The sacred Text becomes fixed and inviolable, both terrifying and seductive in its holy perfection: "The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it." That, I submit, is the voice of a slave to a false god, a price no Christian should ever pay.

What then, about loosing the reins? What if we come to agreement that this marriage really is worth saving, and to do it, we have to give up the notion that the text of scripture as we have received it since the time of the European reformation is the ultimate expression and test of revelation? Can the Anglican commonwealth of churches honour the integrity of individual believing, practicing, Spirit-filled Christian communities first by coming to a refreshed agreement on the canon of Scripture, and then by officially releasing the constituent churches to decide for themselves what is inerrant for them?

Commonwealth has stood the test of time as a way to practice political neighborliness, political hospitality. We already have at least one Anglican blueprint for it—the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1886 and 1888.

Speaking of Scripture, the Quadrilateral upholds "the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the revealed Word of God" and "The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as 'containing all things necessary to salvation,' and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith." These as you know are classic Anglican positions on Scripture: the principle of received, closed canon is declared, but the interpretation of that canon is never defined, as by contrast it was in the confessional churches.

From my perspective thus far, it seems to me the theologies that divide us are not arising from the present canon itself, but the interpretation of individual texts within the canon. I have argued that the closed canon as we have received it in the Anglican churches is the bedrock all of us need-- as human beings we need the assurance that our Scripture is God-breathed and indeed contains all things necessary to salvation.

As I also argued, God has so created us human beings that boundary-pushers and garden-tenders need one another, that we are meant to pull together as a team, no matter how different and even distasteful we might seem to one another. Creator God has chosen to differently-able us, no doubt for His glory and the growth of His Kingdom.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty laity and clergy alike have with the Windsor and St Michael reports is that they both have emerged from the *Anglican machine*. No matter how prayerfully produced and skillfully written, no matter how much genuine anguish of spirit went into their production, the Reports have a bloodless, bureaucratic tinge to them that makes them pale beside an ordinary Bible class on fire with the Spirit as they together “rightly explain the word of truth.”

Here on the ground is where scripture truly comes alive and where the holy people of God form and reform the community of Christ. Can not the Anglican machine honour the individual integrity of believing, practicing, Spirit-filled worshipping communities by freeing them to decide for themselves what is inerrant for them?

At least since Gregory the Great, loosening of the reins to such a degree has not been catholic practice. Sectarianism—every person her own church—might seem too high a price to pay for the Anglican catholic wing in particular. But it’s in that wing of the mansion I find my own home, and from that perspective, I don’t think we Catholics have much to worry about.

Of all Christians, Catholics trust and adore Holy Spirit, especially as the Spirit constantly makes the Church. Church is people in worshipping community, the Body of Christ both locally and universally expressed. We teach individual and corporate sanctification. It is axiomatic for us that the glory of God is humankind fully human.

So eventually we should have no more trouble than the Protestant, Charismatic and Broad wings of Anglicanism in returning the standard of Scriptural inerrancy to local Spirit-filled worshipping

communities, as the conversation between Creator and Creature continues. God makes us unique individuals—should it surprise us that God may well have something distinctive to say to each of us, and that we will seek out other Anglicans who share in similar conversations?

What I do know of the process of Scriptural canonization is that the best academic work indicates that despite variance in detail, the core of both Hebrew and Christian canons was easily achieved. The ministry of Holy Spirit assured miraculous agreement on essentials as our present Bible was forming, and I have no reason to doubt that the same Spirit will assure that Scripture will not deconstruct into incoherent fragments—the Bible's Big Story, I have good reason to trust, will remain in all its clarity and power. The present canon of Scripture, I trust in the Lord Christ, will not change. And the work of the local Spirit-filled worshipping communities, I likewise trust in the fully human and fully divine Jesus, will in the living and lively Word weave a rich tapestry of belief and practice throughout His Kingdom on earth.

Leaving aside the issue of how local “local” might be, is it not possible that having studied and prayed over scripture, one believing, practicing, Spirit-filled local Anglican community might sincerely and legitimately differ from another believing, practicing, Spirit-filled local Anglican community? Is it not possible that if one decides that Holy Spirit is calling it to ordain gay persons and the other decides that Holy Spirit is calling it not to do so, that both can respect and honour the legitimate decision of the other, and to continue to live together as brothers and sisters in Christ, in spite of their legitimate difference in understanding revealed truth?

Going on Retreat

If life in this world for a Christian can be understood as preparation for life eternal, and if garden-tenders and boundary-pushers may never be completely comfortable with one another in this fallen world, how, for the sake of the Kingdom coming, might both garden-tenders and boundary-pushers try to keep both the horses pulling as a team?

I have been lifting up the positives of differences. Since each human being is unique, differences of theology join differences in taste and opinion, and differences in physical, mental, emotional and spiritual attributes.

Since God creates us, we can be assured that the uniqueness of individual humans is not a sign of the fallen world. It is what God intended.

What we make of differences, however, signals whether we are redeemed or otherwise, and of whom we are disciples. Whether or not a war can be theologically justified, whether or not good can come from evil, war is always a sign of intentional disharmony, of wholeness deliberately broken. Wholeness intentionally broken is sin, part of the price we pay for eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and thus attempting to be like unto God.

Every experienced Christian knows harmony and wholeness is just as possible as brokenness. Reconciliation is the healing agent, and reconciliation is always a choice, both during the process from wholeness to brokenness and even when brokenness has established itself.

When I worked at AIDS Project Hartford in the mid-'80's, I met a lot of men who were reeling not just from their diagnoses (which in those days was a sentence to death in six months) but from the aftershock of being precipitously outed. We had a lot of guys come in dazed and saying "Not only do I have AIDS, but now my Dad will *know* I'm a fag!"

We found ourselves reminding these brokenhearted guys that love always wins. Yes there were exceptions. But in the end, just about every family we knew of took back its wrecked son with an oceanful of tenderness and compassion.

Those were the days when Jerry Falwell was in full cry—AIDS was God's judgment upon the abomination of homosexuality. But little by little, a miracle: straight evangelical Christians volunteered to help out at the Project. I remember weeping over an article in the *Christian Century*, written by an evangelical, exhorting his fellow evangelicals to leave the final judgment to God's mercy and in the meantime "roll up your sleeves and get to work" among the dying gays and drug users, not condemning them or proselytizing them, but ministering to them in their suffering.

I for one am glad the Anglican Church calls itself a communion. Communion can be understood as a commingling of distinctive elements. It is as we say in the Prayer of Humble Access, "that He might dwell in us and we in Him"-- that the Creature may dwell within the Creator and the Creator within the Creature. In the two natures of Christ, we see the perfect communion of perfectly disparate elements, the Human and the Divine. Saints on earth commune with saints in

heaven. And in a good strong marriage, two distinctive individuals commune with one another to make something together that is greater than the sum of its parts.

In the Gospel of Mark there is a scene from Jesus' ministry that speaks eloquently to love, faith, humility and healing.

Jesus has just been transfigured, and has left the mountain with Peter, James and John, and he's on the way to rejoining the rest of the disciples. He finds himself confronted with a nasty scene. The rest of the disciples have tried to heal an epileptic boy, and have failed, and now they're arguing with the crowd that has gathered.

The desperate father of the boy bursts from the fracas when he sees Jesus. "If you're able," he pleads, "if you're able to do anything, have pity on us and help us!"

Jesus is incredulous. "'If you are able—if *I am able?*' Look, everything can be done for someone who believes!"

The father cries out, "Jesus! I believe! Help my unbelief!"

The bickering crowd has noticed by now, and starts running toward Jesus, the boy and his father. Quickly, before the crowd can overwhelm them, Jesus heals the boy. Later, when his disciples take him aside and ask why they couldn't accomplish what he did, Jesus reminds them, "This kind of demon can only come out through prayer" (Mark 9.14-29).

Why couldn't the disciples heal the boy? I suspect their attitude was wrong. They might well have gone into the situation rather full of themselves, rather certain of their favour with God and their powers to heal.

Contrast that with the father, who wants to believe with all his heart, soul, mind and strength, who does believe-- but knows that that he is a sinner who is still full of doubt. He is a humble man, who deeply loves his shattered son. He's a lot like the publican Jesus notices praying in a corner of the temple, "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner."

Jesus makes the point when he says that "This kind of healing demands prayer." The humility the boy's father's demonstrates is the attitude of prayer, of supplication, of utter dependence on God. For all we know, the disciples, who-- not unlike many of us in the ministry business-- had perhaps forgotten the basics and were perhaps too "professional" to stoop so low, even in the face of a demon of such stubbornness.

Love and faith are part of the same package. Both of them demand humility. All of them lead to healing. Love, faith, humility, healing—they're all first principle if you're a Christian.

Biblephiles, the hierarchy, academe, "professional" churchfolk lay and ordained—maybe it's time we all put ourselves in the place of the epileptic boy's father, be supplicants, convinced of our own unworthiness, place ourselves at the foot of the cross. Can we lay aside the debates and the churchspeak and the institutional demands and traditions that get in the way of deep and

personal intimacy with God and with other people whom God calls family? Can we worship God with a pure heart, "no more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home?" Glorify God, and enjoy God for ever?

Most of all, can we go quiet, and really, *really* listen again for the Word of God? Can we become like old Abraham?

And having become like old Abraham, can we not choose the way of reconciliation?

Suppose the whole Anglican communion went on retreat for a while—without reams of printed guidelines from Canterbury or any diocesan offices. Just leave it to individual congregations and maybe the deaneries, and see what happens after a year or so.

Is it foolish of me to hope that we will become convicted by love, holy love, divine love?

Is it foolish of me to believe that many of us will emerge from retreat more spiritually healthy than we've been in years, ready to be as Christ in the world, loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbour as ourselves?

Is it foolish of me to hope that we'll trust each other more, and issues like Biblical authority, joining gay folks in marriage, ordaining somebody regardless of their sexual orientation, and alternative episcopal oversight will be resolved on the principle of Ephesians 4.15—"speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into Christ?"

Is it foolish of me to hope that even the dream of an irenic world-wide Anglican communion won't enslave us? That Anglicans can be again a broad tent of meeting, convening and covering and celebrating every tribe of our feisty family?

Is it foolish of me to hope that if disagree we must, if part we must, we will do it graciously, still friends in Christ, knowing that in the end, in the blessed *parousia*, all division in Him will cease, and all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well?

Is it foolish of me to hope that our horses might—sometimes—pull as a team?

So-- I'm a fool for Christ. I'm in good company. And it's here I can stop.

FR EDWARD WAGNER, ST GEORGE'S CHURCH, OWEN SOUND, ONTARIO

10 JANUARY 2007 / COMMEMORATION OF ARCHBISHOP WILLIAM LAUD (1645)