



# WHAT IS HOLINESS AND WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

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**I**N RECENT DECADES, Anglicans across the Communion have been rather obsessed with the matter of Anglican identity. “We are Anglicans and they’re not” has become a rather silly game played at all levels of our church. However when the conversation turns to spiritual practice and the thirst for holiness, a broader common understanding emerges. It may be as simple and profound as the three weeks of daily Eucharist at the 1998 Lambeth Conference where the liturgies differed yet a common shape prevailed. Or the fact that in the midst of our present disputes and disagreements, we continue to be fed by Holy Scripture and the spiritual works of poets and priests. Indeed one identifying trait of Anglicanism is a wariness about definition. We know we worship One who will always be beyond our understanding. Consequently the poetry of George Herbert and T.S. Eliot are as influential as *The Laws Ecclesiastical Polity* by Richard Hooker. We warm to that which draws us closer to the divine flame. Anglicans are far less likely to be participants in angry debates when they recognize that, regardless of agreeing on this point or that, they are in the presence of the Holy. Consequently a leader such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu has been able to hold theological opinions about homosexuality without being attacked viciously because it is widely acknowledged that he is a man of God who has both suffered for, and served well, the people of God.

Anglican understandings of holiness agree that one never arrives but is always on a journey. There are stages and degrees but always a pilgrimage.

God gave me the light of nature when I quickened in my mother’s womb by receiving a reasonable soul. And God gave me the light of faith when I quickened in my second mother’s womb, the Church, by receiving baptism. But in my third day, when my mortality shall put on immortality, he shall give me the light of glory, by which I shall see himself. To this light of glory the light of honour is but a glow-worm the majesty itself but a twilight; the cherubims and seraphims are but candles; and that Gospel itself, which the Apostle calls the glorious Gospel, but a star of the least magnitude. And if I cannot tell what to call this light by which I shall see it, what shall that which I shall see by it, the essence of God himself? And yet there is something else than this sight of God intended in that which remains. I shall not only “see God face to face,” but I shall “know” him (which you have seen all the say, is above sight) and “know him, even as also I am known.”<sup>1</sup>

What is totally lacking in this picture is the abhorrence of the human person before the individual knows God in Christ. Rather God is always granting grace. It is the individual who gradually awakens to the accompaniment

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1. Easter sermon by John Donne, in *Love’s Redeeming Work*, Geoffrey Rowell, Kenneth Stevenson and Rowan Williams, eds., New York: Oxford, 2001, page 144).

of the Redeemer and Sanctifier. Thus William Perkins, a fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge, from 1584-1595 wrote "Vivification is the second part of sanctification, whereby inherent holiness being begun is still augmented and enlarged. First we receive the first fruits of the Spirit, then a continued increase of them." Perkins goes on to list the various parts of such holiness: knowledge of the will of God; the sanctity i.e. longevity, of the memory of good things; the sanctity of conscience which bears the fruit of inward peace; sanctity of will; and finally sanctity of affections including a zeal for God's glory and "sanctity of body whereby it is a fit instrument for the soul to accomplish that which is good."<sup>2</sup> (*Ibid*, page 121).

It is the focus of his final point and a subsection of that point in Perkins' *A Golden Chain or Description of Theology* which has caused so much unrest in Anglican circles. In the 21st century can a Christian involved in a monogamous same-sex relationship, which may or may not be called marriage, be understood to be growing in holiness? If compared with serial monogamy or random sexual encounters, or even self-destructive acts, the affirmative seems obvious. In a society which has little tolerance of the single adult, unless he/she is clearly in transition, it is hard to support the expectation of celibacy for gays and lesbians. Nevertheless the question remains whether the human body, if it is to be a "fit instrument for the soul" can commit to such a relationship.

One simple way to decide the question is by reference to John 15:4-11. "Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." If there are examples of outstanding gay and lesbian Christian life and ministry, and there are, it is only possible because of "abiding in Christ."

One argument against this approach is posed by the Zacchaeus Fellowship a group of deeply committed Anglicans who experience same-sex attraction and believe they are called by God in Christ to not engage in that lifestyle. Some are celibate. Others are in heterosexual marriages. They call on The Anglican Church of Canada to abandon our permissive ways and return to obeying Scripture. To the Zacchaeus Fellowship it could be offered that while some are called to celibacy, and the forsaking of certain lifestyles, others are called, in that lifestyle, to bear fruit to the glory of God. Equally, those who have been healed by God in Christ might be said to be healed so that glory is given to God. At no time however would we then say that everyone will be so healed. The story of the man born blind, receiving his sight in John 9, might be a helpful chapter to guide our understanding of both healing and the human tendency to blame those on every side of a complex situation.

One gradual change in Anglicanism over the last two hundred years has been the movement from passive obedience, as an ideal, to the belief that the Gospel calls for social action and particularly social justice. Hence we have participated in the abolition of slavery, women receiving the right to vote, racial de-segregation and anti-apartheid action. While these can still be understood theologically as the leading of Christ, there is nevertheless a degree to which the Christian advocating for justice is a partner with Christ. In the same way that one says "yes" to a vocation to holy orders, every Christian has to decide if he/she will live a life of sacrifice and service in the context of Christian community. The gift of human freedom, for the Christian, is a gift to be enjoyed by the grace of God, to the glory of God, while rooted in community. To this point one could easily argue that the use of money by Christians in the first world is a far greater scandal than any relationship between consenting adults deemed contrary to Christian sexual morality.

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2. William Perkins on The Christian Household, *Ibid*, p. 122.

What is holiness and what does it look like? Holiness is a scent carried by each life lived in relation with God and neighbour, and in response to the Good News of God in Christ. Holiness is an attribute that comes when one knows God's forgiveness of one's sins and God's forgiveness of other people's sins. It is knowing you are the beloved of God and learning day by day to recognize others, all others, as God's beloved sons and daughters. Growth in holiness is growth through prayer, silence, the art of listening. One becomes holy in relationship with the Holy: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.