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## Presentation 1: In a Language “Understanded”

**Clarity in a diverse environment “*Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works .....*”**

To begin, let’s go right back to our foundations. Among many other things the founders of Anglicanism gave us Thirty Nine Articles of Religion. Among them one that I believe sets a tone for part of our unique character as Anglicans, and one whose primary purpose has at times been lost, and from time to time clouded.

### **Article 24. (*Of the Articles of Religion*)**

*It is a thing plainly repugnant to the Word of God, and the custom of the Primitive Church to have public Prayer in the Church, or to minister the Sacraments, in a tongue not understanded of the people.*

I have come to understand this to have a far broader meaning than has perhaps been understood generally. For our purposes I’d like to

put Article 24, in the positive and say that worship is to be - “in a tongue understood of the people”.

That was at the time of writing understood to be English. In time it came to be understood as a particular style of English. So strong was this understanding that even the missionary efforts of the church among foreign peoples imposed the English tongue. We have only to see some of the legacy of the Residential School Issue to see a modern day version of that same attitude.

In a tongue “understood of the people” is I believe a statement that worship should be in a tongue that people actually speak. Article 24 is in fact about worship in the “vernacular” - in the language “of the people”.

John Ralston Saul, in his Massey Lecture Series “The Unconscious Civilization” tells us that “one of the signs of a healthy civilization is the existence of a relatively clear language in which everyone can participate in their own way”.<sup>1</sup> I don’t believe that the church is any different. The sign of a healthy church is the existence of a relatively clear language (written, spoken and symbolic) that invites participation.

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<sup>1</sup> John Ralston Saul “The Unconscious Civilization” pg. 57

This is so essential to Anglicanism. We are a church that has never asked the faithful to check their brains at the door, but instead encourages a faith dialogue – something that at times we do well, and at times not so well. It is essential to who and what Anglicans are, as reflected in our worship life. We have to clearly understand and be understood.

This has moved us from time to time in and out of harmony with what I believe to be the intent of Article 24. We have had our struggles over language and rites, but always the focus was on a liturgy through which we could clearly convey an understanding of God and the relationship of redemptive and liberating love that engages the human race with God.

Various Churches within the Anglican community have been more or less successful in holding this focus. We have not done badly in Canada, but we could do better.

However, the limited scope of Article 24 is seen in that it makes reference only to the printed and spoken word of worship. But what of the “words” that we speak with symbols, with ceremony, and with liturgy in general.

For this we must look to Article 34. that in part reads:

**Article 34 (Of the Articles of Religion)**

*It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, or utterly like; for at all times they have been divers, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men's manners.....*

I think that one of the true riches of Anglicanism is the language it speaks through worship. What we must be careful to preserve in the midst of a diverse world is a language in worship that engages contemporary society not just generally, but in particular the part of society in which that worship is taking place. It must be a worship that invites not simply acceptance but a response built on a foundation of theological reflection in language that is accessible at various levels of understanding. At the same time it must be a language (spoken or symbolic) that is flexible enough to address issues that affect the faithful in daily life in terms that enable people to apply their faith.

In my opinion, we have lost a generation of young people in the Anglican Church because we have failed to address their contemporary issues in a language that they understand. There has

always been a sense of “adult-ness” about how Anglicans have traditionally approached worship. Even when we involve youth or children, we tend to use adult language and adult symbols inviting them to “reach toward” us, without “reaching toward” them. We have perhaps not heeded the broader wisdom of Article 34.

My concern is that we find ourselves forgetting that the vernacular (not just the language, but all other aspects of language in a broader sense) can vary not just from culture to culture, nation to nation, and people to people, but in some places from community to community and between groups within communities and certainly in communities with a particular focus. Without considering that reality, the official liturgies and music of the Anglican Church in most countries are locked into not only a printed, but a copyrighted book or books. -in some ways, working against the spirit of both Article 24 and 34, although I will recognize that as a debatable point depending on your particular outlook.

Some of the basic symbols (symbolic language) of worship that span languages, cultures, races, and histories have been overlooked or mutated beyond comprehension. Others have begun to take on new forms that speak directly to the contemporary experience. The

concern of pastors and leaders of worship must be whether these symbols convey clearly what we intend them to convey.

Take for example “water” and “washing”. What was once a perfectly practical action in the liturgy, done for purely practical reasons was reduced in time to the use of a finger bowl in which little more than thumb and forefinger get wet. The practical element vanished and the “lavabo rite” faded into unimportance. I could stretch a point and say that it is no wonder that some children think that two drops of water dabbed on their face is “washing” - after all that’s the kind of washing that’s done at church. (*The story of St. John Lateran baptistery*)

It is interesting to see how many places are adapting once more, a very practical position in reaction to the new health threats (either actual {SARS} or to an anticipated pandemic, by modifying, in fact restoring the practical nature of washing.

There are those who have chosen to replace the lavabo bowl with bottles of hand sanitizer. I am surprised that some enterprising person has not yet created a memorial brass dispenser in good Anglican tradition. Yes, gone is the symbol of cleansing water but in

its place a contemporary sign of modern hygiene which may convey a message in this generation.

My own preference, a pattern in use in our own parish is an actual "washing rite" (perhaps we have simply restored something that was lost) in which all who touch the elements including clergy, servers and lay assistants actually wash with soapy water poured over their and drying them with fresh clean terry cloth towels.

I'm not saying that one or the other is right or wrong. I'm only sorry that we have been forced to think this through by the health concerns of the day. It tells me that we have allowed something of the "clearly understood" symbolic elements of our worship to be not so "clearly understood" for far too long.

I am glad that we have a variety of responses for I think that in some places the plastic bottle of hand sanitizer speaks in a manner more understood by people, while in other places the sound of water, smell of soap and site of clean towels has it's impact on understanding as well. I believe that we need to think these things through, and act according to our thinking.

All this is only a small portion of the foundation for saying that one of the first things that identifies and characterizes Anglicanism is that

it speaks clearly in word, symbol and action to a diverse society. It is not part of the Anglican character to slur our words, cloak our symbols or make our liturgies unfathomable.

Speaking clearly does not mean that we have to be cookie cutter type communities in terms of worship, or language, or liturgical usage. Nor should we seek the lowest common denominator. But it does mean that the over arching understanding of conveying what and who Anglicans are through our gatherings is something we cannot leave to chance or the simple durability of liturgical texts.

That brings me to add one further “nuance” of understanding to this theme. Let me put a spin on the fact that we have been a “people of the book”, throughout our history. Unlike the Hebrews who are a people of THE BOOK, (The Torah) we have chosen another book – the Prayer Book. The spin I want to put on this is that I think we have been too literal in what we mean by that. Now this is not to encourage anyone to abandon their ordination vows and give up using authorized texts as the primary source for worship. It is however an invitation to understand the Prayer Book not as a physical book, but as a theological concept. A book, once printed, is unchangeable. It can be revised and re-printed, but again it becomes unchangeable. But a concept is an ever rolling stream of growth and

development. Failing to see “prayer book” as a concept has meant countless times of “losing” something so that we could move forward. It does us well to remember that the BCP in 1662 was a compromise document that had an expected life span of some 10 years or so. The original intent was not a permanency but the ability to adapt.

I think that part of the dullness that many see in Anglicanism is a result of the fact that in failing to see the Prayer Book as a concept for public worship we have seen it as the dictum from which we must not stray. (The BAS deals with this more effectively in acting more as guide than a control and being more permissive than restrictive in its rubrical statements.) It has been too easy to do the same thing week in and week out because the book is “*hard copy*”.

But let me invite you into the idea that the Prayer Book is a concept embodied in both BCP and BAS (and all the other books in all the other national churches). Authorized texts (which I wish at times were richer, more varied and more responsive to changing needs and situations or more adaptable to special occasions), do not have to always be accompanied by the same music, the same ritual, the same symbols. I constantly encourage bishops to permit (within reason) the use of liturgical texts from other national churches and from religious communities and from the First Nations because they

exhibit texts often more richly expressive, and because a change of phrase now and then makes us take note.

This is the second quality that I think identifies and characterizes Anglicanism, worship is flexible and adaptable within a recognized framework. It is not loopy-goopy, without form or flow, but disciplined and structured, it is not overtaken by emotion, but balanced with it, not coldly theological, or obscurely ceremonial but intellectually stimulating, and visually captivating.

We need to reclaim in our seminaries and our parish life the ministry of preaching the word. Good preaching has suffered of late in the Anglican Church in this country but is one of the primary means of speaking clearly of the Good News.

It is not that we should be able to go anywhere and say and see the same things. Rather is it that we should be able to recognize the framework as Anglican while relishing in the richness of diversity which is our reality as the people of God. If you want to experience this in an “in your face” way, check out the community at St. Gregory of Nyssa, in Los Angeles, California. (<http://www.saintgregorys.org>) The framework is there, you know you are in an Anglican Church, but

everything else, from the vestments, to the dancing to unique arrangement for worship are local developments.

So, let me invite you to think and dream into these principles:

- we must speak in a language and in all forms of language so that we are clearly understood;
- we must be consistent in speaking clearly so that we understand ourselves;
- we must listen, so that we understand and celebrate adaptability, variety and diversity within a recognizable framework.

So, I ask you to reflect on what it mean for us to have this wonderful framework of the Prayer Book as a concept and a keen awareness of the needing to speak, symbolize and act in ways “understood” by our community.