

[Isaiah 58:9b-14](#)  
[Psalm 103:1-8](#)  
[Hebrews 12:18-29](#)  
[Luke 13:10-17](#)

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO, RECTOR OF ALL HALLOWS PARISH, SOUTH RIVER, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND, ON THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, AUGUST 25, 2013, AT ALL HALLOWS CHAPEL AND THE BRICK CHURCH

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In a BBC “undercover” documentary about North Korea, a Western visitor was taken to visit various places of achievement in that impoverished country. In one visit, they arrived at a state-run hospital, which provided free healthcare to all the citizens. However, there didn’t seem to be any patients, only wary and suspicious staff. So the undercover reporter asked to see the patients. The response from the staff: “We only treat patients in the morning. Since it’s the afternoon, they are not here.”

God help you if you have an illness that needs to be treated in the afternoon!

In the Gospel of Luke today, the leader of the synagogue also talked about the rigid scheduling of healing activities. Jesus had just healed a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years. But this was the Sabbath, a day on which no one was allowed to work. And because the self-righteous leader of the synagogue considered Jesus’ act of healing to be “work,” he became indignant and said to crowd,

*"There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."*

God help you if you need treatment on the sabbath day! Well, literally, it happened that way. Jesus Christ, God made man, came to the crippled woman's aid.

The deeper lesson embedded in the Gospel today is about the proper understanding and role of Tradition, whether in the Church or in the world around us. Is Tradition something that must always be respected, and never be changed or altered? Or is Tradition something that must be done away with in order for the new to come?

My brothers and sisters, in the good old Anglican fashion, I tell you that the answer is something in between!

First of all, let us talk about what Tradition means. In the context of our faith, when the word, "Tradition," is used, we may think of the words we use in worship, the gestures we have when approaching the sacrament, our Book of Common Prayer and hymnal, how our church is structured, the creeds, smells and bells, holy water, chrism, the sign of the cross, and a myriad of other visible and audible things related to church. But this morning, I'd like to debunk that line of thinking.

All the things I've just talked about, while they may be symbols we hold on to dearly, are not the real and authentic "Tradition" in the three-legged stool of Anglicanism - the trinity of Scripture, Tradition and Reason.

What? One may ask then? What in the world is Tradition in that case?

Properly understood, it is the Sacred Tradition that gave rise to the various treasured symbols of our faith. And the sign of the cross, or the use of the holy water, in and of themselves, are not the Tradition with the big "T." We may call them "traditions" with the small "t" if you wish. Think of Tradition almost like a person. It is living and organic. It grows and changes over time. Tradition with the big "T" is the living faith transmitted by Christ through his disciples to the Church.

The New Testament Greek word for Tradition is "paradosis." It does not mean something that is "handed down." Rather, it means something that is "handed

over.”<sup>1</sup> The difference between the two is that something that is “handed down” to us is an order and assignment. It is more like we have been assigned a very specific task by the hierarchy and we must carry it out as instructed letter by letter. Something that is “handed over” to us, however, means that we are now the heirs and proprietors of the charge given to us. It is indeed a daunting and serious task - we, the Church in every generation, has the responsibility in carrying out the work of the Sacred Tradition - the living faith of the Church, in ways appropriate to our times. In that sense, the Tradition is the revelation that Jesus Christ through his apostles “handed over” to the Early Church, which “handed over” the same faith to subsequent generations.

The Holy Spirit continues to help us understand the Tradition handed over to us in each and every generation. The Spirit sometimes works through the discernment of a large part of the Church, such as the evolving stance of the Church in regards to slavery over time; the controversy surrounding various revisions of the Book of Common Prayer; and the decades-long conversations and study that the Episcopal Church has undertaken on the role of women and people of various sexual orientations and gender identities in the church.

In our day, there is a double test for what may be rightfully considered “Tradition.” The first test is whether the Tradition concerned is in accordance with the principle embodied in divine revelation.

The second test is whether such a notion of Tradition can be justified by right reason. (The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church)

When we apply these tests to the attitude of the leader of the synagogue concerning healing on the Sabbath, he fails the first test because the Sabbath is for made for humanity, not the other way around (Mark 2:27). He fails the second test because refusing to give treatment to a sick person in need when the resources are available cannot be justified by reason.

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<sup>1</sup> For one thing, the Greek word used when Jesus was “handed over” to Pilate derives from the same word for Tradition - *paradosis*.

The leader of the synagogue may have thought that he was upholding tradition. But, the Gospel truth indicates that he was standing outside of Tradition. Authentic tradition, to the dismay of some perhaps, turns out to be an ever-evolving entity.

The Orthodox theologian, Vladimir Lossky, wrote that "one does not remain in authentic Tradition by a certain historical inertia, by keeping as a 'tradition received from the Fathers' all that which by force of habit flatters a certain devout sensibility. On the contrary it is by substituting these [perceived] 'traditions' for the Tradition of the Holy Spirit living in the Church that one runs the most risk of finding oneself finally outside of the Body of Christ. It must not be thought that the most conservative attitude alone is salutary, nor that the heretics are always 'innovators.'" (Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, Faith Press, London, 1975)

Let me unpack his argument a bit here. If we become too rigid in holding on to that which we think we have received, if we do not have enough humility to give the Holy Spirit the space to surprise us, then in the end, we will sadly find out that we have become the leader of the synagogue in today's Gospel. We will find out that we have not been following Christ.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, is well aware of the danger of misunderstanding the Tradition "handed over" to us in the 77-million strong Anglican Communion. He recently said the Church had to steer a course between, on one hand, compromising so much that it abandoned its "core beliefs" and, on the other, becoming so intolerant that it fractured completely.

During his official visit to the Anglican Province of Mexico, he preached about the life of Jeremy Taylor, the former chaplain to Charles I who was imprisoned under Cromwell.

"I sometimes worry that as Anglicans we are drifting back in that direction," he said.

"Not consciously, of course, but in an unconscious way that is more dangerous.

“Like a drunk man walking near the edge of a cliff, we trip and totter and slip and wander, ever nearer to the edge of the precipice.

“It is a dangerous place, a narrow path we walk as Anglicans at present.

“On one side is the steep fall into an absence of any core beliefs, a chasm where we lose touch with God, and thus we rely only on ourselves and our own message.

“On the other side there is a vast fall into a ravine of intolerance and cruel exclusion.

“[That ravine] is for those who claim all truth, and exclude any who question.”

He went on: “When we fall into this place, we lose touch with human beings and create a small church, or rather many small churches – divided, ineffective in serving the poor, the hungry and the suffering, incapable of living with each other, and incomprehensible to those outside the church.

“We struggle with each other at a time when the Anglican Communion's great vocation as bridge builder is more needed than ever.”

My friends, it seems to me that in order for us to continue to be bridge builders, there is something you and I can do here at All Hallows. We must continue to make the ideal of “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You” a reality in our lives. We must challenge ourselves to be more welcoming. We must consider what we can do together with the churches around us so that we can become even more effective in serving the poor, the hungry and the suffering. A big part of that will come alive in our souls and actions when we know and believe in our hearts the essence of the Tradition “handed over” to us - a saving ministry for all, for ever, founded by Christ for the life of the world.

Brothers and sisters, make our Tradition alive!

Amen.