

Notes for a sermon preached for the Episcopal Church of the Nativity, Boyne City, Michigan, on 16 August 2026 (Proper 15A), by the Rev. Dr. J. Barrington Bates, Priest-in-Charge.

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; I am tormented by a demon.”

You may think my prayer a bit fanatical, but I assure you I am having something like post-traumatic stress disorder after leading a mission trip several years ago.

Oh, not the kids—they were great. Well behaved, congenial, hard working, willing and ready to pitch in, and of good disposition throughout.

And not the work—although I was (and am) a bit skeptical that building a deck on someone’s trailer home was the most pressing need humanity faces, even in Altoona, Pennsylvania.

Nor even the food or accommodations—although considering we paid under \$300 each for a week’s room and board, plus all expenses of construction and the cost of the program staff: well, let’s just say the food and the housing didn’t surprise me.

No, what has me still reeling, even *years* later, is the worship.

I mean, there’s nothing to help convince you that you are truly an Anglican like a week deep in praise music, evangelical fervor, jumping, dancing, waving, and personal testimony.

Now, I imagined that this might appeal to the teenagers.

(I don’t much remember my teenage years, so I really can’t say what to expect. Friends of mine quip that one day I must have crossed over from age 3 to 30, skipping everything in between.)

But not so of these teens. They found some things interesting, quite a few repugnant, and more than a couple absolutely hilarious.

They came home and reported to their parents that now they understood what our Episcopal worship was about, what our community meant, and why we did what we do.

So I've tried to sort out just what are the distinctions between us and them, in broad brush strokes.

What makes Anglicans different from evangelical Christians?

I've reduced this—in an unscientific and very overly generalized way—to these major contrasts.

First, what I call “exterior versus interior.” Evangelical Christianity is all about show. It's about moving in a particular way, experiencing the music in a manner everyone can see, and doing the same thing as those around you.

Oh, we have our conformity foibles, too. Don't be misled.

But our faith tends to be more interior, deep in our soul.

What most Anglicans hope and pray for in worship is not a stirring performance that leads us to an ovation, but that moment when we felt touched by God, when the hair on the back of our head stood up, when we realized we were so intent on participating or listening that we actually forgot to breathe.

Personally, I think the interior experience of faith is far more powerful and profound than the exterior one.

You can turn on the exterior one. There may be some actors in our midst, and they can tell you that it is possible to play happy when you are sad.

It may not be easy, but it is possible.

Our faith allows us—no, it actually *requires* us—to be in the place where we are.

If it is Easter Day and your mother just died (that actually happened to a friend of mine this year), even on the great feast day of the Resurrection, we are not expected to jump for joy about Jesus.

At some point, perhaps, we can resolve the tension between the way things are and the way God would have them be—but this is not a requirement for our everyday life or our regular worship.

Our faith comes from within.

Second, there's doctrinal conformity versus freedom.

This is maybe the biggest reason people are Anglicans; I know it matters a lot to me.

And I'm a pretty orthodox Christian. I don't question the virgin birth or Jesus' divinity or the real presence.

(I'm not sure I fully understand any of those doctrinal assertions, but I don't question them either.)

But it's important to me that our faith allows us—no, it actually *requires* us—to form our own belief system, to develop our own theological interpretation, to assemble our own personal creed.

One friend of mine posted this on social media: I'm an Episcopalian because I prefer questions that cannot be answered to answers that cannot be questioned.

Not so of the evangelicals. They don't stand and recite a creed perhaps, but there are touchstones of their doctrine that permeate every nuance of their worship.

Things like *sola Scriptura*, the idea that Scripture alone has final authority in all matters.

Or that the Bible is an elaborate series of codes and signals of which we humans are meant to discover the *one* true meaning.

Or that there is one—and only one—moment in one's life when one must turn to Jesus and accept him as your personal savior in order to be saved.

Or that Jesus died on the cross to satisfy God's lust for chastising evil humanity, as substitutionary punishment.

Incidentally, you can believe all those *if you want to*.

I don't happen to subscribe to any of them, and evangelicals would have to subscribe to them all.

The point is that we have *freedom* to believe what makes sense to each of us, according to our understanding, in harmony with what God has revealed to us.

We are so committed to freedom that our Anglican Communion—that's 110 million of us worldwide, if you count the disaffected ones—the Anglican Communion has proved unable to develop or adopt a confessional statement.

Remember the Windsor Report and the Anglican Covenant?

These are now just an interesting bit of history—not formally adopted doctrine requiring our conformity.

Most Anglicans eschew doctrinal conformity and uphold freedom.

Then, *third*, there's what I call faith in church versus faith in action.

There was a lot of talk from those mission-trip organizers about what they called "light switch Christians."

These are folks who can turn on, or turn off, their Christian faith depending on the context.

Turn it on for worship, turn it off for shopping—that sort of thing.

I quipped that we Anglicans were more sort of "dimmer switch Christians." It wasn't just "on" or "off" for us—there's much more nuance.

I bet you know what I mean.

Say you're at a social gathering, and you overhear someone nearby say something like "Jesus would want us to send those illegal immigrant children back where they belong."

You either slide the dimmer "up," and saddle over for an intense conversation about what Jesus actually said and what he would likely do—or you slide the dimmer "down" and slink off to the bar to order another Martini.

For the most part, for us, our faith is not simply "on" or "off."

That means it is rarely—if ever—entirely shut down.

Our faith is one that is called in to action every day.

And not necessarily by external signs.

We are quite content to live a life based on a moral system of love—but without necessarily explaining to everyone we meet what that moral system is, or how we came about it, or even that it is always changing, always in flux, always adaptable.

We think it's more important that we all stay together in community than that we all agree on, well, just about anything.

We insist it's more urgent that we act in a Christ-like manner than that we batter others with our Christianity.

In a way, we are very much like that Canaanite woman in today's gospel story.

- We don't necessarily conform to others' expectations,
- we do advocate for others in need, and
- we know we need God's help to keep life's many demons at bay.

To us, as to that Canaanite woman, Jesus replies, "Great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And we shall all be healed. Amen.