

Anniversary of John Keble's Assizes Sermon 1833
St Andrew's Brighton
14th July 2006
Church, Faith and Public Life

1 Sam 12.19-25
Psalm 51.6-15
Romans 15.1-6
Mat 10.16-23

Being an Anglican is not all that easy at the moment. There's a lot of turmoil, pain and uncertainty. Our beloved Anglican Communion is threatened with splitting and falling apart. There is apparently irreconcilable conflict over the ordination of women and the place of homosexual people in the life of the church. On top of that there is the cumulative demoralizing effect of decades of reports of decline in church attendance. In recent years scandals of one sort and another have undermined trust in churches and church leaders. Churches seem to have less influence in society at large than they once did and contributions by church leaders to discussions of important questions in the public arena often seem to be unwanted and dismissed.

It's likely that these factors have contributed to a loss of nerve, to something of a withdrawal from the public square and even to a lack of energy for mission and possibly even to a less than courageous accommodation to the world around us.

If there is truth in this summation, then it's also true that it's not for the first time. It has been said of 1833, the year in which John Keble delivered the sermon which we commemorate tonight, that –

The religious outlook was dark indeed. Rarely had things looked blacker for the English Church ... For a generation the clergy had been closely allied with the Tory Party, and the Whigs were now in power, with the result that the church had become exceedingly unpopular with the Government and with the people particularly in the large towns. The tyranny of the State over the Church had been steadily increasing during the eighteenth century, and had now become almost complete. Added to this there had been since the French Revolution a rapid growth of secularism throughout England. The popular philosophy of the time regarded religion as 'the rubbish of superstition,' and looked to education, enlightenment, and reason to provide the cure for the ills from which mankind was suffering. The internal condition of the English Church was not such as to afford much hope that it would be able to meet successfully the onslaughts of these combined forces. With but scanty realization of sacramental

life, dull and conventional services, worldly bishops and clergy, and a widespread absence of devotion and enthusiasm, the Church was not likely to have a powerful hold on the hearts of her children (Project Canterbury, 1933, 2).

That there are stark differences between England in 1833 and Australia in 2006 is understandable. That there are also striking similarities is perhaps surprising. It seems that for the church to be recognizably one, holy, catholic and apostolic was then and is now a distant hope.

In our current circumstances it would be easy for us to lose heart in ourselves and what we have to offer. But if we look hard at the heritage that is ours I think we can derive from it a fresh confidence to face these admittedly demanding times. And we can discover afresh a gift for the wider community with which we have been entrusted.

Keble's 1833 sermon was later credited as the beginning of the Oxford Movement which revitalized a catholic outlook and emphasis within Anglicanism. I suppose that we who are here tonight also celebrate and value that emphasis and wish to see it flourish and make its contribution in the life of church and society in Australia and beyond.

But rather than simply see the catholic emphasis within Anglicanism as one school or party or faction among others, let us see that there is an essential catholicity about the very character of Anglicanism as a whole. Beyond the question of personal preferences, backgrounds and loyalties Anglicanism at its best has wide sympathies and a tendency to inclusion while persevering in pursuit of the truth.

The Archbishop of Canterbury described very well, in his statement made just a few weeks ago, the emphases that constitute our

... distinctive historic tradition – a reformed commitment to the absolute priority of the Bible for deciding doctrine, a catholic loyalty to the sacraments and the threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons, and a habit of cultural sensitivity and intellectual flexibility that does not seek to close down unexpected questions too quickly.

But Anglicanism is characterized not simply by the presence of these distinctive emphases. Equally important to Anglican identity is the constant interaction and interplay among them. This interaction has the effect of exerting a moderating influence in Anglican thought and life so that it's not uncommon for Anglicans to end up somewhere in the middle on any issue. This has become known as the Anglican via media, or middle way.

This inclusive, balancing approach runs deep in Anglicanism. But it's important to be clear what the via media is and what it isn't. Some have made the mistake of thinking that finding a middle way is simply compromising on matters of principle for the sake of peace, of giving up on the search for truth in the interests of institutional unity. It's sometimes said that you can believe anything you like and still be an Anglican.

But that's not what's going on at all.

Back in 1968 the orthodox churches pushed the Lambeth Conference to be clearer about what they meant when they described the Anglican Church as comprehensive. If it didn't mean 'anything goes' what did it mean? The bishops said this:

'Comprehensiveness is an attitude of mind which Anglicans have learned from the thought-provoking controversies of their history. ... Comprehensiveness demands agreement on fundamentals, while tolerating disagreement on matters in which Christians may differ without feeling the necessity of breaking communion. In the mind of an Anglican, comprehensiveness is not compromise. Nor is it to bargain one truth for another. It is not a sophisticated word for syncretism. Rather it implies that the apprehension of truth is a growing thing: we only gradually succeed in "knowing the truth." It has been the tradition of Anglicanism to contain within one body both Protestant and Catholic elements. But there is a continuing search for the whole truth in which these elements will find complete reconciliation. Comprehensiveness implies a willingness to allow liberty of interpretation, with a certain slowness in arresting or restraining exploratory thinking. We tend to applaud the wisdom of the rabbi Gamaliel's dictum that if a thing is not of God it will not last very long (Acts 5.38-9). Moreover we are alarmed by the sad experience of too hasty condemnation in the past (as in the case of Galileo). For we believe that in leading us into the truth the Holy Spirit may have some surprises in store for us in the future as he has had in the past.'(Lambeth Conference 1968, 140-41).

At the heart of Anglicanism is a constant tension between these perspectives where each challenges and corrects the others. Right at the heart there is a process of dialogue which requires a great deal of effort and energy to sustain.

'It fails if it becomes a search for some innocuous common denominator and for compromise in principles in the interests of institutional unity. It can sometimes be taken hostage by extremists in any one of the four camps who become absolute about their perspectives and motivated either to convert all others or to exclude them from the communion. The dialectical process implied here is no mere juxtaposition of different views. The talk about the via media is really only a description of the dialogue as though it had come to rest

in some invisible equatorial point. But the reality behind the dialectical process demands continued discussion, never a premature resolution of the tension as imagined in most concepts of the *via media*. From the very nature of multilateral dialogue there must be vigor, imagination, persistence, determination, respect for differences and a spirit of reconciliation. ...

No one of the four groups should be missing from the dialogue, nor should any be excluded by the others. What is required is not an exhausted and hostile state of noncommunication, but the enduring of the tension in the confidence that truth will emerge from the dialogue' (Wolf, 1979, 152-53).

'What is required by the very nature of the dialogue is not compromise for the sake of peace, but comprehension for the sake of truth.' (ibid, 154).

It is difficult to remain engaged with those with whom you differ. It requires a maturity to maintain respect, openness to the truth of their insights, preparedness to disagree and to stay in relationship.

That's why the Anglican Church has been called an ecumenical movement in and of itself.

The danger that Anglicans live with constantly is the tendency of one part to fly off and leave, seeing its own particular emphasis as the whole truth and the others as containing no truth.

Were this to happen, the whole dynamic system would fragment and disintegrate because it's only when each part is in tension with the others and held in its proper orbit by the others that the system as a whole hangs together.

The image of an atom or a solar system isn't a bad metaphor for Anglicanism. There are various elements moving in relation to each other, exerting force and influence on each other, keeping each other in balance and on track. The elements of the system are not really in opposition to each other but complementary. Remove one and the whole thing changes and is at risk of collapsing.

Now, this Anglican ethos has a strength about it and, I believe, a lot to offer to our wider society and indeed our world. It's inclusive and comprehensive in the best sense. It has an openness to new apprehensions of the truth, while not allowing us to dispense too lightly with what has been received.

Indeed, as Archbishop William Temple once said,

'There is always an initial presumption in favor of the tradition for it represents the deposit of innumerable individual apprehensions. None

the less it must be remembered that it is by fresh individual apprehensions that the tradition has been developed, and to reject the new intimation may be, not the suppression of human aberration, but a quenching of the divine spirit.' (Temple, 1940, 344).

So the spirit of Anglicanism is future-oriented while respecting our inheritance. It pursues the truth with vigour, while resisting the temptation to absolutism. It values artistic, imaginative, intuitive, synthesising modes of knowing alongside the cognitive, rational and analytic. It holds together the importance of the individual in the context of community.

This true catholicity present at the heart of our Anglican ethos really does have something rich and deep and valuable for the wider community.

But for us to make this contribution to the wider community we will have to take more seriously ourselves the heritage which is ours. Within the Church we will need to come to a deeper and more profound appreciation of our own catholicity and not feel it as a threat. And making room for diversity does not mean compromising the search for truth in the name of a quick peace. But it does mean cultivating a spirituality which is sufficiently humble to recognize that each of us might still have something to learn from the other who sees things differently.

Such a spirituality of engagement which humbly pursues truth in company with those from whom we differ could be very great gift to our world. There can be no doubt that pluralism will characterize the future of Australia and the world, in almost every respect we can imagine. In a pluralistic context the choice seems to be between frozen noncommunication and engagement, between isolation and interaction, between fragmentation and community. The former can only lead to violence of one sort or another. The latter has the potential to contribute to the shalom of the reign of God.

We have been entrusted with an enormously valuable gift. If we can make it available with energy and insight it would be a means of fundamentally challenging the future that could otherwise emerge. It would challenge the continuing drift towards secular materialism, it would respond to the rising thirst for spirituality, it would offer an alternative to conflict or fragmentation as means of dealing with pluralism.

In his 1833 sermon Keble asked 'How may a man best reconcile his allegiance to God and his Church with his duty to his country, that country, which ... is fast becoming hostile to the Church?' He concluded two things were necessary: intercession and remonstrance – prayer and protest.

In our own day there can be no doubt that prayer remains a firm foundation – a holy, humble spirituality that is open to God and to others. But I wonder whether our calling as Anglicans is not more to demonstrate than to remonstrate. If we can discover afresh and be true to our own heart then our life will be a gift to our nation and world.

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