

What we do with the Bible - Anglican Schism part 1

Kingham & Churchill 17/8/2008

Readings: Matthew 5:17-32; Matthew 7:15-23 & Jude 3&4

Introduction

Schism probably wasn't a well-known word until recently.

Now it seems to go with the word 'Anglican' like the word 'bread' goes with 'butter'!

Which is, frankly, heartbreaking.

It ought to go with words like 'faith', 'hope', and 'love'.

But the Archbishop of Canterbury has said that a split in the communion may be inevitable.

And this week, one of England's senior bishops called for a planned split, before it happens chaotically.

But who might split from whom, and why?

I have two goals for the next three weeks.

The first is the smaller, and it is to try to explain what is happening and what's causing it.

The second is far more important, and it is to give you, or remind you of, the tools you need to understand it, and to be good witnesses as Christians in the midst of it.

Peter calls on us in 1 Peter 3:15 to "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."

If your friends ask you what's happening, could you do that?

Could you give them an answer for the hope that you have?

I. What has been happening & why?

So, what has been happening & why?

This has to be a very brief synopsis.

The Church of England went overseas for two main reasons.

Missionaries went abroad with the good news of Jesus.

And Christians moved abroad, and needed a local church.

So Anglican outposts were formed all over the world.

In time, these Anglican churches became independent, but remained in a Communion not dissimilar to the British Commonwealth – a voluntary communion.

Today, the Anglican church numbers nearly 80 million.

And it is growing very fast - the average Anglican is likely to be non-white, young and living in the Third World.

There have long been maverick clergy in the West who dispute various basics of the Christian Faith.

Some clergy don't accept Jesus' bodily resurrection; his deity; his uniqueness as the only way to salvation.

Similarly, some deny the truth and authority of the Bible.

What has changed is that, in a few places, such teaching has moved from the maverick to the norm.

The most publicly expressed form has been in Gay Rights.

The worldwide church has always unanimously taught that the Bible says sex is only for within marriage.

But in the US and Canada, as well as to a lesser extent in the UK, some Anglicans now deny that.

As the 1998 Lambeth conference approached, the pressure to change our understanding of God's view of gay sex grew.

Overwhelmingly, the world's bishops affirmed the status quo – sex is only for marriage.

The full text of the resolution is on your handouts.

But nothing changed.

In 2002 the Canadian diocese of New Westminster authorised same-sex blessing services.

The following June, the US Diocese of New Hampshire elected a new bishop.

He had left his wife and teenage daughters, obtained a divorce, and then met and set up home with a man in a homosexual relationship.

Two months later, the US Church's governing body confirmed Gene Robinson's appointment and also approved same-sex blessings.

Rowan Williams had only been in post for 6 months and was rapidly learning the meaning of 'poisoned chalice'!

He called an emergency meeting of all the primates, the senior bishops of each of the 38 provinces.

They met in Lambeth and all signed a statement calling for Robinson's consecration not to go ahead as it would, and I quote, "tear the fabric of our Communion at its deepest level, and may lead to further division on this and further issues as provinces have to decide in consequence whether they can remain in communion..."

Those words were prophetic!

They explain why bishops representing nearly half the world's Anglicans did not attend this year's Lambeth.

Staggeringly, just one month later, despite having signed that statement calling for it not to go ahead, Griswold himself consecrated Gene Robinson as bishop.

And more and more same-sex blessing services took place.

Since then there have been many meetings and calls on the US and Canadian churches to stop same-sex blessings and the ordination of non-celebrate homosexuals.

All have been ignored.

This month's Lambeth conference made the same calls.

The Bishop of Oxford, not surprisingly, doubts whether they will be heeded this time either.

This action has led to many parishes in Canada and the US voting to join a more orthodox Anglican province.

Many of these clergy and PCCs have been taken to court.

A friend of mine is Rector in Pittsburgh where the entire Diocese is considering leaving and it is a very upsetting.

Because these Christians are passionate about the Lord Jesus, and so they are passionate about Christian unity.

Jesus was passionate about unity, and gave two reasons for being so, in his prayer the night before he died.

Firstly, he prayed for his disciples: "Holy Father, protect them ... so that they may be one as we are one." John 17:11

God is three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, each united in love and purpose and belief.

So Jesus wants his followers to be similarly united, in love and purpose and belief.

And secondly, he prayed for future believers.: "May they [us] be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them..."

John 17:23

Our unity should testify to the truth of the Gospel.

But the other side of Jesus' teaching concerns false prophets: "Wolves in sheep's clothing".

He, and the apostles after him, warned that many false prophets would come, teaching a new gospel, denying who Jesus is and what he did, and excusing immorality.

Listen to the epistle of Jude:

"Dear friends, ... I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men ... have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a licence for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord." Jude 1:3

That is the tension you and I have to live with as Christians.

On the one hand we must work passionately for unity.

At the same time, we have to be on the lookout for false teachers and contend for the truth of the gospel.

As Jesus said, we all need to be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." Matt 10:16

So what of us here in the Church of England?

Well, we aren't immune from similar maverick clergy.

But there seems little likelihood in the near future of General Synod passing legislation that would force us to make decisions like the Christians of Pittsburgh.

And we are very blessed to have, in John Pritchard and Colin Fletcher, two excellent bishops who are entirely orthodox in their belief and morals.

But we do need to be shrewd as well as innocent.

We need to contend for the truth of God's Gospel.

The Issue is Revelation

So there's the synopsis, and that was the short version!

Now, and for the next two weeks, the tools for the job.

The presenting issue is that of homosexuality.

But the real issue, the one that underlies it, is the Bible - whether it is God's Word written.

Or just the developing views of people down the centuries.

So, what is the Anglican view on that?

When anyone is ordained or takes up a new post in the Anglican Church, they have to promise the following:-

that they accept the Scriptures uniquely reveal all that's necessary for salvation.

that they will diligently read the Bible, and defend their congregations against error.

that they themselves believe the faith set forth in the creeds and, for example, the 39 Articles of Religion;

and that they will teach that faith.

But I wonder how many of us here know the 39 Articles of Religion, the constitution of the Church of England?

I only read them for the first time at theological college.

But why don't we know them, if they are so crucial?

Because you will only find them in the old Prayer Book.

General Synod refused to put them into the new prayer book, 'Common Worship'.

Which is a shame because if you look in an old prayer book you will see the purpose of the 39 Articles:

I quote: "for the avoidance of diversities of opinions and for the establishment of consent touching true religion."

In other words, they are there to resolve differences of opinion, like the present ones.

They are peace and unity makers!

What a shame they aren't being used for that purpose.

I. The nature of Scripture

I have given you a summary of the 39 Articles as they relate to Scripture, in modern English.

But are the 39 Articles correct about Scripture being the authoritative Word of God?

Let's ask what Jesus believed.

Jesus lived and taught under the authority of what we call the Old Testament: remember what was read to us from the Sermon on the Mount?
Jesus said: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them." Matthew 5:17

And he then went on to address Christian teachers:

"Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:19

And do you remember in Mark 7 when Jesus told off the religious leaders for replacing elements of the Old Testament Law with their own alternative teachings.

Jesus said: "you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down." Mark 7:13

So Jesus' view was that the Old Testament was the Word of God and that's why he obeyed it.

In John 14 he said you love God by obeying him. E.g. John 14:21

But what of the New Testament?

Well, if Jesus was the eternal son of God in human form, his words and actions recorded in the four gospels are also the Word of God.

And he promised that he would ensure that his apostles were led into all the truth by the Holy Spirit and would be enabled to remember all he had taught them.

Thus giving us the rest of the New Testament which is also, equally, the Word of God.

Do you see why the Anglican church was founded so firmly on the Bible as the authoritative Word of God?

Because that was Jesus' view of it!

But here in the West, the contemporary Anglican view is very different.

You won't often hear views like those set out in the 39 Articles.

What you will hear from many of our leaders is of the threefold authority of Scripture, tradition and reason: likened to three legs on a stool.

To decide what is God's will, they tell us, we need to bring to bear the Bible, the traditional understanding of the church down the centuries, and our reason.

Which sounds perfectly acceptable, doesn't it?

Use the little grey cells God has given us?

When the Bible speaks of the rivers clapping their hands, I bring my reason to bear and decide that isn't literally true - it is poetically true.

But what happens if the stools legs are of different lengths?

How do we know God's will when the Bible, tradition and reason don't agree?

In other words, which leg has the casting vote - to magnificently mix the metaphors!

The answer in recent years within the Anglican church has all too often been that reason has the casting vote.

If I think that something in Scripture is not reasonable to believe or obey, then I won't believe or obey it.

It's taken me a long time to get there, but I think we've got to the core of the Anglican church's problems today.

Our constitution, the 39 Articles, says very clearly that Scripture has the casting vote.

Many Anglicans in the West say Reason has it.

But we will have different definitions of what is reasonable.

So if we change our constitution and give reason the casting vote, we must not be surprised if we come to totally different conclusions.

The elevation of reason over Scripture can only lead to the anarchy that we are so sadly experiencing today.

I. Conclusion

Next week, I want to address the vexed question of which bits of the Old Testament law do and don't apply to Christians and why.

Please have a good read of Article 7 before next week.

And on September 7th we will look at what the Bible does and doesn't actually say about homosexuality.

Prayer (do business)

Handouts on the next page.....

The 39 Articles of Religion relating to Scripture

Modern English version

A1 6: The Sufficiency of Scripture for salvation

Holy Scripture contains all things necessary for salvation. Consequently whatever is not read in Scripture nor can be proved from Scripture cannot be demanded from any person to believe it as an article of the faith. Nor is any such thing to be thought necessary or required for salvation...

A1 7: The Old Testament

The Old Testament is not contrary to the New, for in both the Old and New Testaments eternal life is offered to mankind through Christ... Although the law given by God through Moses is not binding on Christians as far as its forms of worship and ritual are concerned and the civil regulations are not binding on any nation state, nevertheless no Christian is free to disobey those commandments which may be classified as moral.

A1 19: The church

The visible church of Christ is a congregation of believers in which the pure Word of God is preached...

A1 20: The authority of the church

...it is not lawful for the church to order anything contrary to God's written Word. Nor may it expound one passage of Scripture so that it contradicts another passage. So, although the church is a witness and guardian to holy Scripture, it must not decree anything contrary to Scripture...

A1 21: The authority of general councils

General Councils ... may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God. Therefore, things ordained by them as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they be taken out of holy Scripture.

A1 34: The customs of the church

It is not necessary that customs and forms of worship be exactly the same everywhere. Throughout history they have differed. They may be altered according to the differing nations, times, and habits of people provided that nothing is commanded contrary to God's Word...

1998 Lambeth Conference statement 1.10

Overwhelmingly agreed and so the official teaching of the worldwide Anglican Communion

“This Conference:

- (a) commends to the Church the subsection report on human sexuality;
- (b) in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage;
- (c) recognises that there are among us persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Many of these are members of the Church and are seeking the pastoral care, moral direction of the Church, and God's transforming power for the living of their lives and the ordering of relationships. We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ;
- (d) while rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture, calls on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialisation and commercialisation of sex;
- (e) cannot advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions;
- (f) requests the Primates and the ACC to establish a means of monitoring the work done on the subject of human sexuality in the Communion and to share statements and resources among us;
- (g) notes the significance of the Kuala Lumpur Statement on Human Sexuality and the concerns expressed in resolutions IV.26, V.1, V.10, V.23 and V.35 on the authority of Scripture in matters of marriage and sexuality and asks the Primates and the ACC to include them in their monitoring process.”