

Anglicans-who are we?

*Summary of address given at the CIMS Quiet Day
in St. Mark's Dundela on Saturday 21 February 2009
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It was noted that, of all Christian traditions, Anglicanism was most hospitable to diversity. The fact that the current difficulties of the Communion are centred on the limits of diversity demonstrates that it is something which has almost been taken for granted in the past.

Generally we accept that only the whole Church can know the whole truth and we are inclined to be modest about our spiritual attainments. Perhaps we have much to be modest about, but where it springs from genuine diffidence it is an amiable fault. However if it springs from indifference then it is probably better to be narrow and exclusive, which at least indicates some passion for truth.

By and large we are also hospitable to people in whatever state of spiritual maturity. We will not demand that all are spiritual athletes; nor that all should be exactly like us. Many people from many different spiritual backgrounds worship in our parishes, but would never consider themselves to be fully paid-up "Anglicans". That is not a difficulty for us and points to the provisional nature of all Christian traditions.

The only thing that we hope is that they hear the Shepherd's voice and respond to it.

As an ancient Church Anglicanism should take the long view and not rush to judgement. A sure sign of immaturity is the "me too" mentality. It works for them so it must work for us. They do it, so we must to. Sometimes this is smuggled in under the guise of "good practice"-but like all commercial terms this can only be transferred to the complexity of the Christian Church with great care.

The outlook and work of the clergy are important, even in an age which quite rightly places an emphasis on all-member ministry (a phenomenon which has always been a feature on Anglicanism *avant la lettre*). Incumbents are not instituted as ministers of a congregation but

as the rector of a parish, which implies a much wider ministry and openness to all.

The group of autonomous Churches which, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit make up the Anglican Communion, are among the strangest in the Christian world. In fact they are unique, in that they hold together in an unparalleled way the continuous tradition of Christianity from the earliest times, through the Middle Ages and right down to the present day; but give special emphasis to the insights worked out in the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

It is perhaps unfortunate that this has come to be called the *via media*. It is not a compromise between two or three competing schemes. It is a holding together of all the truths and insights of the Christian traditions; inheriting all the excellences .

One of the problems of such a complex identity is that it is possible to give allegiance to only one part of it-therefore the Church splits into parties. Anglicanism can only flourish when its members see themselves as inheritors of the whole tradition, Evangelical, Catholic and Liberal and seek to make full use of the riches of each.

So the Anglican understanding of the Catholic Church is not that of a bureaucracy or an Army, or a cosmopolitan institution, but of a family where the vigour and depth of our common life spring largely from our differences. It is not in the least desirable that other Churches should become like us. It is desirable that we should fulfil the role for which Providence through the working out of history has equipped us.

That is one of the reasons why we can get by with a minimum of definition as compare with other Churches. On the face of it the 39 Articles may look like other confessions of faith but in fact they embody an entirely different theological method.

In history the Christian church has divided roughly into three main strands marked first by the division between East and West in the eleventh century and then by the further division within the West at the Reformation of the sixteenth century. But even before this took place the Church was badly maimed by our inability to persuade Israel to accept the Gospel.

As result Christianity lost the earthy, prophetic strand which Judaism embodies and came much too exclusively under the influence of Greek thought. Having said that, it is also only right to concede that the positive emphasis which the Eastern Churches place on the created order was largely obscured in the Western Tradition following the split which took place in the eleventh century.

The Reformation of the sixteenth century is of key importance to Anglicanism and it is especially so because of the peculiar manner of the Reformation in England. There, and subsequently in much of Irish Anglicanism, spiritual renewal was achieved with much less recourse to abstract principles than in Continental Europe. That has not been an entirely unmixed blessing, but it has given us a very distinctive ethos.

However the Reformation was in one sense damaging to both the Roman and the Protestant Churches. It meant that Rome was deprived of the influence of most of Northern Europe which had a tradition of national independence, even in the Middle Ages. That left Rome free too entrenched discipline and order for which the Roman world, pagan and Christian, has always had a particular gift.

On the other hand the Protestant Churches forfeited the gift for order which has left them with excessive congregational independence and the habit of division, especially in America.

At the Reformation the Anglican Church did not reach forward to innovate. It reached back to recover the Old faith- intact, but unencumbered

with doubtful accretions. Therefore it retained the ministries of bishop, priest and deacon, thus preserving Catholic Order. Certainly it revised the understanding of many of the responsibilities of those offices. For instance the sacerdotal priesthood gave way to a ministerial priesthood (or presbyters as Hooker preferred) and in time bishops were no longer part of a "hierarchy", but exercised their powers collegially with other orders of clergy, and by virtue of their moral authority.

Perhaps the greatest legacy of the Reformation for Anglicanism has been the emphasis on spiritual liberty. Each person, because of the immediate access to the Father which Jesus Christ has opened up for them, has a responsibility to make good for themselves all the blessings of the Gospel. It is not for any authority, of Church or State, to prescribe how much of the Gospel a person may have. They are at complete liberty to claim all or nothing.

However what the Reformation conceded to each person was not the *right* of private judgement, but the *duty* of private judgement. And to that private judgement the Anglican Churches offered the whole treasury of Catholic Christianity. A person's spiritual wellbeing was in their own hands and they couldn't shunt it on to any one else. However it was not intended to be a warrant for each person to make up their own religion.

As a consequence of this (and an important factor to remember in the on-going debate about the limits of diversity) is that the Anglican Communion cannot ever be a world-wide, tightly disciplined organisation like the Roman Catholic Church. Or if it did it would cease to be Anglican. Our bonds are principally bonds of affection, although they may now require some minimum juridical dimension. We are first cousins, and though we may never have met, we recognise the family resemblances as groups who gather together under bishops, priests and deacons, to hear the Scripture read and to break bread and share wine as guests of Jesus Christ.