

## A Sermon preached at St Mary's, Warwick Pentecost (2012) – Acts 17: 22-34

The Church of England continues to travel through choppy waters. This week the House of Bishops met to find a compromise designed to hold the Church together over the issue of women bishops. People are still picking over their statement to decide whether it's a 'sell out' or a nifty piece of footwork that keeps everyone in the same boat. Only time will tell what the outcome of these further proposals will be but, at heart, the issue of women bishops is but one manifestation of a debate that will never be fully resolved in the Church and that's the matter of where authority lies.

Traditionally authority in the Anglican Church has rested on three 'pillars' – scripture, tradition and reason. Each of those pillars is held to be of equal value and importance but what happens in practice is that different groups within the Church want to make one first among equals. Thus, we have the basis of different groupings within Anglicanism as (in broad bush terms): evangelicals stress the primacy of scripture; anglo catholics stress the primacy of tradition and liberals stress the primacy of reason. So, the issue of authority is never straight-forward because – even if we gather together Anglicans who affirm Christianity as a **revealed** religion – they will continue to disagree about the *focus* of that **revelation**. For some it would be the Bible, for others it would be the Church and for others it would be the bar of reason. And if we peel back that layer of authority, then underneath we find the question of cultures and how religions relate to them.

The story goes that a rabbi was invited to a very important banquet at which he sat next to the Roman Catholic bishop. By-and-by the meat dishes arrived but the rabbi asked for a vegetarian dish instead as the meat wasn't kosher. 'Really rabbi,' said the bishop. 'When will you abandon your old-fashioned superstitions and eat like the rest of us?'

Swiftly the reply came back, 'When I'm invited to your wedding reception!'

Religions have always tried to mark themselves off from the cultures in which they're to be found. We can see that in the Old Testament with the importance of circumcision, the dietary laws and how some of the prophetic and historical literature berate those who've adopted and adapted too much to local cultures. The same tension is there in the New Testament – we only have to think about the issue of eating meat offered to idols for the Corinthian church. At the heart of this matter was the question of whether Christianity is different from other religions and, if it was, how should it be shown? But then, we also have in this evening's second lesson Paul using the culture of the Greeks as a springboard for evangelism. He uses the statue of the unknown god as the manikin on which to hang the garment of the Christian Gospel.

And this approach has been fundamental to Christian evangelism down through the ages. If the Church isn't able to establish links and make contact with the local culture, then there won't be any chance of communicating the good news of God's love revealed in Christ. That's why the Bible has been translated into more languages than any other book. Christianity cannot isolate itself from its cultural history in the Old and New Testaments not from its many cultural contexts into which it has been subsequently transplanted. And running alongside the difficult question of Christianity and authority, is the equally challenging issue of Christianity and culture.

In 1951 an American theologian called Richard Neibuhr published a volume entitled *Christ and Culture* and it still remains the classic treatment of the subject. All-in-all he outlined five distinct approaches that Christians take towards the cultures in which they find themselves. Each one has a good grounding in the Bible and Christian history and can justifiably call itself Christian. So let us peel just one more layer back on this matter. We're not going to look at each of the five approaches in detail (you may be relieved to hear!) because beneath the question about how Christianity relates to culture is the story of creation and the fall. On the one hand, a strand of Christian thinking about our origins says that creation was made by God and reflects God's glory. On the other, Christianity also proclaims that creation's imperfect and has fallen short of God's glory.

And our understanding of whether God's creation is essentially good or essentially bad then works its way through into how different Christians see the nature of the incarnation and the work of Christ. If we begin with an image of God as perfect and self-contained, unable to bear imperfection, then Christ couldn't be fully human – because humanity is fallen and God couldn't have anything to do with human nature. Instead God just wore the body of a man like a cloak and didn't feel the pain and emotions of a human being. That way lies a very early Christian heresy, which ends with Gnosticism. However if we have an image of God which starts from the incarnation, then God is not separate from the world but intimately related to and affected by the world. Again, we are not far from another heresy here – that of pantheism, where God and the world are identified as one and the same. But if we keep the two in tension then we find a middle way between equating God and the world and God being removed from the world. This middle way is a God who's still in relationship with creation and with humanity; a God who's made known through relationships – with the Children of Israel, the human being Jesus and with the continuing Body of Christ (the Church). As one doctrinal statement from the Church of England has put it: 'The God of Jesus is the God of the Old Testament, personally involved in his creation, holy and one. In him justice and love are held together' (*We Believe in God*, p 85).

One of the reasons why the *vexing* question of ordaining women remains vexing is because it's not just a simple issue of equality. It requires us to think deeply about theological fundamental matters such as: (i) the nature of authority in the Church; (ii) the doctrine of creation and God as creator; and (iii) our understanding of the incarnation and God's work in Christ. Speaking personally, I believe it's right to have women bishops but not because they should be treated the same as men but rather because it's consistent with key tenets of Christian theology.

We started with some nautical images of choppy waters and members of the Church remaining in the same boat so lets finish with Ann Lewin's poem *White Water* (which can be found in the newsletter):

Watching that programme,  
I remembered.

Tiny canoes, turbulent water,  
People pitting their skills against  
The treacherous currents, swept  
Along, barely in control,  
Dashed against rocks, rolling

Out of danger, exhilarated  
But afraid, reaching the  
Finish, battered and  
Exhausted.

I have known that.  
Swept along in fear of  
Disintegration, thrown against  
Jagged obstacles that threatened  
Destruction, gripped by some force  
That almost strangled  
Hope. Calling on all available  
Resources to ensure  
Survival.

Then, just at the point where  
Disaster seemed inevitable,  
Thrown from the turmoil  
Into quiet water, space to  
Regain my equilibrium. Time to  
Reflect and  
Realise that in spite of all  
Appearances, I was held by  
Strong arms that would not  
Let me go.

When currents swirl again,  
I hope I will remember,  
I am profoundly loved  
And need not be afraid.

Discussions about women bishops, authority in the Church and fundamental doctrines of the Church can appear to be white water rides at times but Ann Lewin is right to remind us that through all the currents, obstacles and turmoil we're **forever** held in the arms and love of God.

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*May 2012*