

Sunday 7th August 2022 : Trinity 8

Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16

Living by faith is the only way to live when you can't see the full picture – so we read in our Epistle this morning. The great heroes of faith were heroes precisely because they persevered even when they couldn't see the way ahead clearly. We are called as individuals and as the Church to do likewise.

This weekend marks the end of the Lambeth Conference, the gathering every ten years when the Archbishops and Bishops of the Anglican Communion come together from all over the world to live together for two weeks, pray together, share in worship, study the Bible, enjoy fellowship together, and discuss issues of common concern. Over 600 of them have been gathering in Canterbury, but some have stayed away, notably the Archbishops of Nigeria, Rwanda and Uganda, because of divisions about the issues of human sexuality, and a sizeable part of the Communion now looks to a rival body called GAFCON, who adopt a conservative stance, and who are organising an alternative gathering next year. There is division within the Anglican Communion.

The global Anglican Church comprises about 90 million people from 165 countries, speaking 2000 languages, and although historically the church of England has taken the lead over the past 100 years, the stark truth is that in more recent decades the C of E, and the Western churches have been on the decline, while real growth has been concentrated among largely young people in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Which does raise questions about whether the global church should any longer continue to be led and dominated by the Church of England, and whether Western liberal cultural values should prevail over parts of the world who do not share them.

The theme of this year's conference has been "God's Church for God's World: Walking, Listening and Witnessing Together", but sadly over the conference has hung the shadow of fundamental disagreement about homosexuality in general and gay marriage in particular. Because of this we have in this country been engaging in the process called "Living in Love and Faith" – in which we as a parish have participated, trying to engage with this fundamental disagreement, which is basically between those who believe that the holy Spirit has guided us into new understandings about human sexuality and the God-given nature of our sexual orientation, whether gay or straight: and on the other hand those who believe that homosexuality is condemned in the Bible, which they interpret as the direct word of God, and that therefore that should remain the traditional teaching of the church.

For my part, I am puzzled as to why what I think in the hierarchy of doctrine is basically a second-order issue, human sexuality (which is clearly important but about which there can be disagreement without it being a denial of Christianity itself), has been turned into a first-order issue and the ultimate test of orthodox Christian belief. It's tragic that the issue of human sexuality has become the main focus of division within the Anglican Communion, when it really shouldn't be. Right now the Communion is pretty fragile, and there is talk of schism in the air. Which is all very sad, as historically Anglicanism and the C of E have been a "big tent", within which people with divergent views have lived alongside each other, not always agreeing but talking with each other and acknowledging that there are other points of view. That approach has come increasingly under threat because there are some Provinces of the communion who simply refuse to engage and who issue ultimatums which demand that a particular viewpoint becomes the norm, to which everyone must sign up, or else. So Anglicanism has come to be treated by some, not as a shared tradition

within which consensus can be sought on the basis of mutual respect, but as a battlefield where competing factions seek victory through ecclesiastical power politics.

Just a couple of reflections on this. Firstly, at grass roots level, in the parishes, most people remain unaware of the unseemly infighting and squabbling, and the work of the church goes on. Worship is offered, people grow in their faith, people are baptised and couples are married, pastoral care is offered, and the church engages with the local community in exciting ways. A lot of what has happened at the conference and has been reflected in the media simply goes over people's heads, and thank goodness for that.

But, the squabbles do damage the brand and make even those sympathetic to Christianity feel that the institutional church is simply irrelevant to society and to their lives. Especially at a time when there are so many significant challenges for the human race – climate change, the scramble for the Earth's resources, rogue nations destabilizing the world order, social fragmentation and economic insecurity – all major issues which the church and the Lambeth Conference should be addressing, let alone the fundamental challenge of the re-evangelisation of the Western world.

We need, or the Bishops need, to stop the urge to centralise, stop passing motions that divide and exclude, stop turning the Anglican Communion into a pale imitation of the Roman Catholic Church, and the Archbishop of Canterbury into a kind of Anglican Pope. The C of E is not a top-down structure where people are told what to believe by a gathering of mostly male clergy in pointy hats. It just isn't. Instead we need to reaffirm and embrace a vision of Anglicanism which rejoices in its breadth rather than trying to narrow things down, that celebrates diversity – that we are gloriously different but we belong together – and acknowledges that no one part, province or faction has all the answers. Perhaps the Anglican community needs honestly to acknowledge that we have to live with widely divergent cultural differences and become a much looser federation of churches, united in a common endeavour, proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord, and living, like the patriarchs, by faith – which as the letter to the Hebrews reminds us, means you can't see the full picture, that there is no certainty, that faith is indeed the assurance of things hoped for, but that we walk step by step, looking to Jesus Christ, discerning the signs of the times, and open to new insights and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The journey of faith is about growth, and development and a movement into unexplored territory, as our Epistle reminds us, with all the discomfort of the unfamiliar. We are all on that journey, yes, even the Bishops. Lord, lead us on. Amen