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Lambeth and the Perfect Church

‘What would be the conditions’, I was asked the other day, ‘on which you would be prepared to go to the Lambeth Conference?’ It seemed to me to be a curious question but the questioner persisted. ‘Are you one of those who will pull out if Gene Robinson is invited, or one of those who will leave if Robert Duncan is there?’ The only reasons, it seems to me, not to be at the Conference would be if the Archbishop of Canterbury were to withdraw his invitation to me to go, or just possibly if this Diocese, to which I am also accountable, instructed me not to go. So to avoid any possible confusion I affirm that I shall be at the Lambeth Conference this summer whoever else is invited or not invited, and I have James’ affirmation that he will be there too.

There is a particular reason for this clarity on the part of bishops of this diocese. Charles Longley called the first Lambeth Conference in 1867. His most distinguished ministry was as our first Bishop, establishing and defining the Diocese of Ripon and the role of this church as our Cathedral (quite often in conflict with successive Deans of the Cathedral ...). The act for which he is remembered in history is that calling of the Conference in 1867 in which bishops were invited to express their differences in the context of their unity in Christ. The differences were sharp, including those over the ministry and theology of John Colenso, the Bishop of Natal, who had been deposed by his Archbishop, Robert Gray. There was strong disagreement over the necessity for Christians to believe in the reality of eternal punishment following the publication of ‘Essays and Reviews’. Such was the reality of everyday life in the Anglican Communion.

There could not be a greater contrast between the attitude of the bishops at Lambeth in 1867 and those who appear unwilling to attend in 2008 who I believe to be misguided and missing the point. It is true that a number of bishops did not go in 1867, but their reasoning was that such a conference was unnecessary in principle, because it might exalt the role of the Archbishop of Canterbury and might seek to make resolutions binding upon all dioceses. There was no sense of a need to achieve unity before meeting, or refusal to attend on the grounds of the deep divisions which then split Anglicans from each other. Indeed the fact of such divisions was the chief incentive to meet.

The pastoral encyclical of Longley’s Conference encouraged the Colonial churches to develop their own lives and leadership on the American pattern. It was the most crucial moment in the development of the Anglican Communion as a family of self-governing churches. (Passage added on Longley’s recognition of the need for new patterns to enable local expressions of cultural identity around the world.) To Longley belongs much of the credit for that vision which is imperilled today by the search for a perfect church, in which those who hear scripture differently are to be excluded, and in which any conference must be of the like-minded or like-guided. In complete contrast to the refusal of the 1867 Conference to lay down rules, we find ourselves being required to adhere to Lambeth 1:10 on human sexuality from the 1998 conference as though it had the status of scripture. Those of us who were at that Conference know that the resolution was cobbled together as a response to a section report on sexuality, much of it by those

who had not been involved in the detailed work of the section at all. As an indication of where the mind of the Communion was in 1998 I believe it has considerable authority. It seems to have become regarded almost as a new revelation.

The search for a perfect church seems to me to be a disaster, in terms both of scripture and of the Anglican tradition, but it has a long history. I was visited recently by two Brethren leaders, from Harrogate and from Oxford, who wanted to talk with me about the role of the Bishops in the House of Lords, and discuss the pressures on bishops. It was a good and interesting meeting. At the end I suggested that we pray together. The response was negative. 'We can only pray', they said, 'with those with whom we break bread together – but', they added courteously, 'this is your home. We will stay if you wish to pray'. I did. Amongst my recent purchases is 'The Message', a contemporary biblical paraphrase which I commend to you as a provocative challenge to some of our sometimes lazy interpretations of scripture. Amongst its features are introductions to the biblical books. In the introduction to I Corinthians Eugene Peterson says 'when people become Christians they do not at the same moment become nice. This always comes as something of a surprise.' And he goes on, 'Paul does not disown the Corinthians as brother and sister Christians; does not throw them out because of their bad behaviour. He directs them in how to work all the glorious details of God's saving love into their love for one another.'

The New Testament reveals a church wrestling with truth, battling with conflict, with Christians at odds with one another, and at the same time drawn to one another in Christ. The picture is of the people of God living with conflict in a world which lives with conflict, and Romans 8 reveals that battle in the search for the Kingdom. 'We ourselves groan inwardly while we wait for adoption. Hope that is seen is not hope.' We look forward to the Kingdom. It is a complete illusion that Christians will agree with one another if they only pay proper attention to scripture, or tradition or the guiding hand of God.

The view that Christians should avoid controversy has never been more than a will o'the'wisp in Christian history. God has revealed himself, and does reveal himself, in Christians of very different perceptions, traditions and convictions. To argue otherwise is to narrow the work of God in quite unacceptable ways. When James chose 'Thy hand, O God, has guided...' as our opening hymn today he challenged me either to refute it or to develop it. When Edward Plumtre wrote that hymn he reviewed his varied academic and parochial ministry as Dean of Wells, and looked back over the divisions of the nineteenth century, including the Lambeth Conferences, discerning God's hand in success and in failure and clear that the guidance belonged to God. (Passage added on recognition in this hymn of Gods grace through a wide variety of expressions and understandings of faith.) When John Whale used its refrain, 'One church, one Lord' as the title for his fascinating study of the Church of England over the centuries in the parish of St. Mary, Barnes he deliberately challenged his readers to acknowledge that within the changing patterns and convictions in the life of that parish there is indeed, one Church, one Faith, one Lord.

The search for a perfect church was decisively rejected by the English church through and beyond the Reformation. All the pressure was there. The growing confidence of the Roman Church of the Council of Trent demanded allegiance to Rome, to the magisterium as the guarantee of truth and of the presence of God. The protestant churches of Europe and their puritan allies sought for a

doctrinal statement, such as the Westminster Confession was to become in 1643, to define and exclude.

The English Church, as it developed over the next two centuries following the Reformation, rejected both definitions and has continued to argue, I believe, that ‘God is greater than our hearts and knows all’. He is greater than the convictions of any one of us (I John 3, v. 20). He uses us in, through and often despite our prejudices. At the heart of his work with his church is grace, and the search for a perfect church implicitly rejects a doctrine of grace.

Among the most difficult moments of Lambeth 1998 for me was not the confusion of the human sexuality debate but a fringe meeting of western bishops in which one liberal bishop spoke of our African colleagues in terms which implied that they had not really yet grown to maturity in the Christian faith. He showed no sign of listening to or learning from truth from a culture different from his own. We all need to continue to grow in Christ, whatever our own perceptions, whatever our culture, whatever our deeply held convictions to which Christ has called us.

The debate we face now is often represented as a debate over scripture. I do not believe that is true. I see no desire to move away from scriptural authority for the life and witness of the church. What we do have is division as to how to listen to and interpret scripture: Colenso believed that Moses did not write the five books of the Pentateuch. Longley profoundly disagreed with him, but wanted the variety of views to be aired. I do not believe that it is coincidental that sexuality is at the heart of our current debate. It provokes a deep reaction, while we live happily, though in profound disagreement, with a variety of ethical views on issues of peace and war. Try getting a just war doctrine out of scripture without very considerable help from tradition. It interests me that the vegetarian debate sometimes provokes the same use of scripture, in letters to me, to batter with one view rather than to listen to others.

I have recently been doing some work on Arthur Burroughs, Bishop of Ripon from 1925-34, who during the first world war laid himself open to attack, in a letter to the Times in 1915, by reproaching England for her jingoism and failure to allow or seek qualities amongst the German population which we needed, from our materialist, individualist culture, to emulate. He was apparently surprised when people started to throw bricks through his windows and spit on him in the streets. I believe we face ecclesiastical jingoism now, with churches claiming their own purity over and against the failure and fragility of others. We would do better to reflect on and witness to Christ’s working in and through our own failure and brokenness as Anglicanism does in its relationships with the whole Catholic Church.

The search for a perfect church has deep origins in Novationism, which in the third century deprecated concessions allegedly made to those, including Pope Cornelius, who had compromised with paganism, and in Donatism, which in the fourth century argued that the saints must remain holy and that sacraments presided over by those who were not holy were invalid.

The reflection on the danger of the search for a perfect church has led some to oppose strongly the idea of an ‘Anglican Covenant’ on the ground that it raises the spectre of the Reformation’s excluding Confessions. I do not read it like that. What was lacking in Longley’s conference was

much stress on mutual support. It was more important that churches learned to develop their own identity and cultural independence in Christ. Now there does need to be more stress on our interdependence, as we seek to show by our learning especially from the Sri Lankan church. I should personally be content with the Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888 as that Covenant – though that was not the purpose for which it was developed. The four marks of the Quadrilateral are Scripture, the dominical sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the Catholic Creeds and orders of Ministry create parameters in which we can live and grow. However, a more specific covenant of mutual support does seem to me to be appropriate to our time, and none of the drafts I have seen seem to me to create a confessional church on the reformation pattern.

Nevertheless there is a real threat, in the search for a perfect church, to that biblical variety and indeed dispute by which we grow in Christ. I am sometimes told by those who pass resolutions for Provincial Episcopal Oversight that their issue is not with women priests as such but with a need to preserve assurance and protect against heresy. I am pleased that parishes have the right to pass those resolutions, and I need to listen to them, but the search for assurance – for the perfect church is illusory. Our assurance is in Christ. It belongs to the whole church and is in no way challenged by our fragility, our failure or the times when we are wrong.

Nor can a perfect church be achieved by means of doctrinal confessions or moral codes, designed to define and exclude. We all have, and must have in Christ, our own passions, enthusiasms and beliefs which will bring us into conflict with our fellow Christians. To be otherwise would be to be not perfect, but dead. The Kingdom is built by God through our human prayers, our commitment, our enthusiasm, and above all by his grace. It is his kingdom, not ours.

We shall only grow in Christ if we are prepared to listen to one another and learn from one another. For the bishops they can only hear one another if we go in our disunity to Lambeth as bishops have done every decade since 1867. To argue for unity before we can pray or talk together would mean that we shall never, ever be enabled to grow in Christ through his ministry and through each one of us.

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