

8.00am Trinity 1 English Anglican Identity and listening to what the Spirit is saying to the churches

At Pentecost, we considered the primary gift of the Holy Spirit, given on the Day of Pentecost, to be the gift of hearing what the other is saying – “each heard them speak in their own native language”. In the Book of Revelation, in the seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor, each letter closes with the refrain, “let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches”! My question this morning draws on these two streams of the Spirit to ask, “what is the Spirit saying to the churches; and what quality of hearing is at issue?” And the reason I am asking these questions is as a result of a very interesting paper given at the recent clergy conference by the Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley on what I found to be a very interesting subject, namely English Anglican Identity. And I want to share a little of what she said this morning. She set her remarks within what she described as the present climate of ‘political and ecclesial change, national uncertainty and pervasive global anxiety’. And she made the bold suggestion that our Anglican way might have something useful to contribute to this climate of impasse, impoverishment and anxiety in which we find ourselves. She took three historic features as being important in shaping our English Anglican Identity: one was the Elizabethan Settlement of the English Reformation, the second was the phenomenon of establishment and the third was the theological methodology of Richard Hooker as the underpinning for how Anglicans do theology. And although establishment is not unimportant, I will focus on the first and the last, mostly because they go together.

As regards the Elizabethan Settlement, Dr Coakley prefaced her remarks by referring to two touchstones of Anglican colloquialism, the ‘via media’ and the ubiquitous ‘Anglican compromise’. Whilst both these phrases capture something recognisable about ourselves – that it is a natural disposition to seek an agreeable synthesis out of opposing propositions,

and that a middle way is a desirable goal – she was very keen to usurp any complacency, and pointed out that in the Elizabethan Settlement, the process by which a coherent end point was reached was very far from being mild or mediocre. It was, rather, a very robust process of proponents of deeply divergent views coming together to thrash out an agreed position. The discipline of the process was that all views should be expressed openly and frankly and no one was to leave the table without a genuinely mutually agreeable compromise. Thus the true Anglican compromise is not something that reflects a lowest common denominator, but rather a very best approximation at a highest achievable set of proposals. The nature of Anglican compromise is that it serves the church and maintains unity – it keeps everyone in the room, without dilution of theology or practice. Dr Coakley then went on to use the example of our present struggles with the matter of the priesthood of women and women in the episcopate, as an instance of where, in her opinion, we have failed to adhere to Anglican ecclesial polity as indicated by the methodology of the Elizabethan Settlement. In her view, our present set of arrangements of a dual track church is un-Anglican because we have failed to find a coherent solution to our disagreements. Instead, in her view, we have the incoherence or incongruity of a bishop for the majority and a flying bishop for the minority; because if a bishop is understood to be a symbol of unity you can't have two bishops functioning in the same patch – which is arguably what we have. Now between us we will have different views on this matter. Where I think her comments are useful is in inviting us to address the question as to whether our present modus vivendi is on the one hand the best compromise we can achieve – and is therefore a genuine Anglican compromise – or whether on the other hand what we have is an incongruence or incongruity which may of itself be damaging to our Anglican polity and integrity, because we haven't done our process of theological wrestling adequately. Lying behind Dr Coakley's thesis was or is the question, 'when is a compromise really an incongruence that needs further attention, and when is it the

best we can possibly achieve for now?’ I.e. when is a compromise a fudge, or not?!

Dr Coakley’s comments about Richard Hooker’s theological method were also very interesting. She took the threefold Anglican framework of doing theology with reference to scripture, reason and tradition, and alerted us to the fact that Hooker had a very particular take on the character of ‘reason’, especially as it is used as a tool in interpreting scripture. He talked apparently about ‘participative reason’, meaning that the reason that will be brought to bear in intellectual inquiry, or the interpretation of scripture, is a developing and dynamic quality that will not be the same in successive contexts and eras. As reason develops with developing trends in every possible field of inquiry, so it will be instrumental in shaping different conversations and achieving different propositions as it is brought into, for example, dialogue with scripture. This means, she said, that each time interested inquirers or theologians address themselves to key matters of concern in the church and in society, different observations and arguments and proposals will emerge. I think we can say that in all likelihood, Hooker’s take on biblical interpretation paved the way for what we now know as contextual theology. What this means is that, if, for example, we are addressing such issues as slavery or divorce or gay sexuality, this Hookerian Anglican methodology is going to give us answers (or proposals) that are always developing and needing to be adapted – according to new insights gleaned through the impact of participative reason.

At this point we might want to draw breath. We know very well that it is one thing to propose an Anglican way of either doing our polity and ecclesiology or for doing theology. It is quite another thing for all Anglicans to agree. What I found very energising about Dr Coakley’s remarks was that there are indeed some key understandings and dispositions within our Anglican history and culture that actually may have

more to teach us than we might have supposed. When we are looking for waymarkers in our turbulent national setting it is useful to rehearse our own processes, and it may well be that the best of our Anglican process may be able to serve our divided political scene in these times. Or perhaps we should just lock parliament in Westminster and only allow them out when they have constructed a deal they can all agree on! Who knows?!

But more than this, our first calling is to be listening of course for what indeed the Spirit is saying to the churches, and most of all to our own church. We need not only a grasp of our own English Anglican Identity, but more necessarily a grasp of what it means to listen deeply to the Spirit, whose sound we hear, but we can't always easily catch which way she's blowing: we have to listen out very intently. At the same time we have to go on trying to genuinely hear not only our own voices, but the voices of others around us, because we can't do this on our own. We need them and they need us. As we seek to be true to ourselves as English Anglicans, let's pray that the Spirit will go on leading us into more and more of the truth. Amen.

Reverend Julian Francis

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