

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

In this season of the Spirit, I have a question ringing in my ears, which draws on the letters to the seven churches in the Book of Revelation. And the question is very simple, “what is the Spirit saying to the churches?” You may recall that in chapter 1 of the Book of Revelation, the writer, John the Divine, is addressed by the enthroned, exalted Christ-figure, the Son of Man, and is commanded to write the seven letters. And each one ends with the same resonant refrain, “let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches”. So it seems a reasonable question to ask, “what *is* the Spirit saying to the churches now?”

The other reason why I am posing this question now, is that at the recent clergy conference in Swanwick, ten days ago, we had a very interesting and stimulating presentation from the Anglican theologian Sarah Coakley. It was on the theme of ‘English Anglican identity’. Her presentation was entitled, ‘Our identity as Anglican Christians in the Church of England’. She began by noting the present climate of ‘political and ecclesial change, national uncertainty and pervasive global anxiety’. And she approached her subject by looking at three key historical features; the English Reformation compromise of the seventeenth century, otherwise known as the ‘Elizabethan Settlement’, the matter of Establishment and the theological methodology of Richard Hooker about how Anglicans do their theology.

As regards the matter of the Elizabethan Settlement, she identified the fact that we are inclined to refer to Anglican thought, or the Anglican disposition, as the ‘via media’ or ‘Anglican compromise’, as though there is something intrinsic to Anglicanism that is forever seeking a middle way that is at the same time the synthesis of divergent opinions and acceptable to all. And I think we would want to say that this is a fair

comment. What Dr Coakley insisted, however, was that notions of 'via media' or 'Anglican compromise' should not fool us into thinking that this is about a lowest common denominator or the result of woolly, mediocre or ill-considered thinking. And she reminded us that in the seventeenth century, the Elizabethan compromise was actually constructed in the context of passionate debate between parties within the Anglican family of profoundly divergent views; yet it was precisely the effort to reach a communally agreed, coherent end point, without parting company, that was the critical issue. The point was that all parties should remain at the table, engaged in informed theological debate, and only allow themselves to come away when together they had achieved a coherent, mutually agreeable position. What emerges from this is a deep commitment to what she called an 'ecclesiology of difference' combined with a 'bodily discipline of staying in the room'. She called the outcome of this methodology 'pliant negotiated strength' which I thought was interesting. The strong suggestion here, is that when we are moved to pride ourselves on our diversity of traditions and perspectives within Anglicanism, we need to remember that this is intended to be the outcome of embracing thoroughly our differences. It's about finding a way to coexist honestly and freely after all necessary and robust engagement, and not avoiding the sharpness of our differences or being tempted to adopt a less than acceptable fudge. *Compromise* is Anglican but *fudge* is not. The matter that she used to illustrate this was the priesthood and episcopacy of women in the church. And she pointed us to the 'Five Guiding Principles' as the current 'holding position' in our ecclesial polity that is intended to promote mutual flourishing between the two strands of our Church of England that either do or do not accept the priesthood and episcopacy of women. If you are a little fuzzy on the 'Five Guiding Principles' do 'Google' it and you'll see just where we've got to. What Dr Coakley was keen to point out was that, in her opinion, what we have is actually deeply unsatisfactory from the perspective of true Anglican practice, because although we have expended vast energy on our

internal disagreements over this matter, what we have done is not to lock ourselves in a room until we've reached a mutually agreeable position, but we've ended up with two separate strands under not a single bishoply authority with our bishops as true symbols of unity among us – however painfully achieved – but rather, an unsatisfactory and in her view un-Anglican dual bishoply authority. We have a bishop whose oversight is acknowledged by the majority, and then we have our flying bishops offering alternative episcopal oversight which is acceptable to the dissenting minority in certain matters such as ordination and confirmation and of course the eucharist. Dr Coakley referred to this as a matter of 'incongruence' in our corporate life. I have to say that when I listened to her talking about this at the conference it was something of a light bulb moment for me. I have often wondered why I have found our present position very unsatisfactory and I know now one of the key reasons – it's about bad ecclesiology. Now the pragmatists among us will probably say, 'well, isn't the present compromise of the 'Five Guiding Principles' and the dual bishoply oversight actually the best interim position we can reach without splitting the church, and is therefore worthy of being a true Anglican compromise? Well possibly so! This is after all what we live with. However, is it not also possible that we might be letting go of something intrinsic to our corporate identity and ecclesial functioning, which if we abandon it for the sake of a temporary peace, we are all losers? What is the Spirit saying to the churches?

Over the matter of establishment, I won't linger long except to say that Dr Coakley was keen to underscore establishment as a key feature of English Anglicanism. She felt there was little to be gained by disestablishment and that many negative unintended consequences could well flow from it. Such features as our commitment to every inch of the land, our offer to all of religious ceremonies at key moments in life, the synodical system, the appointment of bishops passing through the PM's office and the fact of bishops in the House of Lords – all these features of

establishment prompt us not to disinvest from the hard task of representative ministry and service within the muddy, sometimes compromised waters of civic, communal and social life. Establishment, she also argued, was a platform from which a prophetic role can be very effective, one which can easily be compromised, if, for example in disestablishment, we are only ever talking to ourselves. At the local level, being English Anglicans means holding on for example, to the importance of us as church members being governors in local schools, being in partnership with local stakeholders like Calthorpe, being a presence in Sunrise and Audley or offering hospitality through the Friendship Place or musical witness through Baby Opera. All of this is about being the church across the sometimes indistinct boundaries of church and not church. I would argue that our intrinsic commitment to establishment shapes very much how we do mission, and it shapes our offer of church within each neighbourhood and in local networks.

I do want, however, to say something about Dr Coakley's remarks concerning Richard Hooker's theological methodology and what it bequeathes to Anglicanism. As Anglicans we do theology with reference to scripture, reason and tradition. This is our tripartite approach, and these are our three sources of authority for doing theology. The suggestion was made to us that Hooker's key innovation was to bring to the dialogue between scripture, reason and tradition *an understanding of reason as developmental*, and what he called 'participative'. Without being familiar with Hooker, what I understand this to mean is that when reason is brought to bear on say the interpretation of scripture, it will be a different and evolving commodity depending on the context and era in which the dialogue is taking place. Hooker asserted, as I understand it, that human intellectual reasoning and critical interrogation will develop and evolve in such a way that when it is brought to bear on scripture, different observations will be made, different meanings will be read into or out of the text and different proposals will most likely therefore be

forthcoming from this process. If this is to be considered a feature of Anglican methodology, then we should expect that when we approach any matter such as for example slavery or divorce, we will find ourselves making different proposals according to time and context. Dr Coakley instanced for us the current example of gay sexuality, and the present deep disagreements that are a feature across the Anglican Communion and in our own CofE. We now have CofE parishes that have extracted themselves from normal Episcopal oversight largely as a result of this matter, and placed themselves under newly-created bishops, sometimes from outside the UK, thereby effectively excommunicating themselves as an act of defiance. Her plea, you will not be surprised to hear, was that we might be robust in drawing on the methodology of Hooker, and his heirs in the contemporary setting, to try and ensure that our approach to such matters is indeed Anglican. She wanted us to be prepared to be theologically Anglican as much as ecclesologically. It has to be said, of course, that among our more theologically conservative sisters and brothers, the call to do theology this way may not appear to *them* to be very Anglican at all! It is however useful, I think, to raise the matter of what is an English Anglican way for doing theology, even though it will be contested – especially within England!

These thoughts from Sarah Coakley leave me with a significant challenge, which I would summarise as the matter of ‘compromise versus incongruence in our common life’. I am sure I am not alone in having felt a level of disease, which I would attribute at least in part to ‘incongruence’, first of all over the matter of the priesthood and now episcopacy of women in the church, and secondly over our present theological incoherence over gay sexuality. In the latter case we don’t have a formal fudge as per the Five Guiding Principles, but rather the incongruity of two separate requirements for personal conduct from the House of Bishops, one for clergy and one for laity. Soon we will have the working document coming out ‘Living in Love and Faith’ that it is hoped

will take our corporate conversation further forward. We hope so very much; for many of us continue to have real difficulty living with a semi-formal fudge that, it is argued, gets us by; but is it truly Anglican, and is it truly a source of healing with potential to promote transformation? When does a compromise become an incongruence that needs fixing; and when is what we have the best compromise we can achieve? (There are also other potential incongruencies/incongruities in our Anglican corporate life which we might also want to explore, but we will keep these for another time).

You will remember me quoting Bishop David Jenkins before, saying after the General Synod vote to ordain women, that ‘the will of God will not be revealed in the statistical movement of feet, but in the work of the Holy Spirit as the church wrestles with what has been decided’. And the wrestling never ceases. What we have to try and ensure, for the sake of our church and her unity and integrity, is that the wrestling is as ruthlessly honest and as Anglican as we can make it, and as open to the Spirit as humanly possible – the same Spirit who enables each one to hear what the other is saying. For these reasons we must go on asking, “what is the Spirit saying to the churches?” And we must, I think, do our best to address this question using our best contemporary version of Anglican methodology to try and find Anglican solutions!

2026 Words
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There are also other potential incongruencies/incongruities in our Anglican corporate life – one is to do with ethnic and cultural diversity whereby Anglicans coming to Britain from around the world may or may not find a home in parish churches; another is what has become of our system of mutual financial support. The commitment of the richer congregations to the poorer ones is arguably breaking down under the strain of rising costs and falling numbers. The question arises as to how easily are we living with these incongruities, if that is what they are?