

Sermon Easter 6 Year C 2022

We do not have to go very far in some church circles to hear an argument that goes something like this: *the church should really get back to what is described in the Book of Acts. We need to get back to basics. If the church reclaimed the pure, simple, uncorrupted church as described in Acts 2, then all would be well.* Not a few churches are idealistic in their view that all the church's issues would be solved - and a more authentic church reclaimed - if we could claw through the accretions of the ages, and get back to a pure, unadulterated, untainted, church. It was so simple then, the argument goes. All we need is simple bible teaching, with none of those popish corruptions some churches get away with, none of those rituals and ceremonies. What we want is a basic Christianity - home churches preferably - all of us sitting in a circle around a coffee table. We don't really need the clergy. All we need is our little groups at home, with our bibles. A pure, 'Book of Acts', biblical-form of Christianity.

A nice idea, perhaps. Needless to say, one that has little appeal to convinced Catholics, such as ourselves (though maybe the occasional niggling doubt might creep in...). But it is a problematic argument to make on many levels, not least about what we make of the 2000 years of intervening history? But also one which doesn't, in fact, stand up to historical interrogation. The best evidence suggests that Christian worship from the start was formal and ritualized. And the church itself was structured in a hierarchal, ordered fashion. It certainly was no congregationalist phenomenon, but catholic in the truest sense, every congregation connected to the others. And besides, there is no evidence of anyone in the first century sitting in circles around coffee tables....

But what gives lie to the idea that the early church was pure, simple, and uncomplicated is what we hear described for us today from the Book of Acts. Something of *the hard reality of life* has hit the infant church. Different understandings of a key theological issue with no easy solution confronts the church. The presenting issue is essentially to what degree must non-Jewish, gentile believers have to conform to the law of Moses. Now, we are so removed from this issue and from the world views which gave rise to it, that most likely we miss the grave nature of the crisis. Without doubt, the success of the Christian mission in the early centuries of the church would have played out very differently if the debate had been settled in another way. But debate it was!! Paul and Barnabas, we are told – against what we might call the 'circumcision party' – *had no small dissension ... with them.*

Now, what we hear today skips over the guts of the debate and picks up the story once the issue has been settled and to the decision that is to be communicated. But something that went to the very heart of the gospel was at stake, namely that obedience to the law could no longer be regarded as the basis for salvation, even if the law, broadly speaking, remained the authoritative guide for Christian living.

How the first council of Jerusalem was conducted, then, *does provide* us with a model of Christian behaviour, especially in times of debate and contention. At a time of *profound* tension between Paul's communities and the Jerusalem community, Christians sought to resolve their differences in an atmosphere of *friendship and respect*. Importantly, *compromise* was a part of the solution. It was not a case of anything goes, nor was it a case that the full demands of the law ought to be imposed. We hear how the letter in the name of the apostles and elders testifies to this. But also important is the *openness to filial correction*. Paul's witness to what God was doing among the gentiles convicted certain members of the Jerusalem church that their position was wrong. This can well serve as an example for dealing with conflicts within the church: that we approach each other in friendship and respect, that we listen to each other, and that when necessary - in humility and grace – we recognise our errors.

Now, most of you would be aware that issues of contention and debate are never very far from the life of the Anglican church. Two weeks ago, this was very much on show as delegates from all over the country met on the Gold Coast for the General Synod of our Church. It had been delayed for two years due to Covid, and so it had been five years since the national assembly of our church had met. In his presidential address, primate and archbishop of Adelaide Geoff Smith outlined some of the effects of the pandemic on the Church: that there has been a drop in numbers, a reluctance to rejoin in-person gatherings, a feeling of tiredness and a loss of momentum, and that we are just trying to get done what needs to be done as best we can. If his diagnosis is true (and I think there is some truth in it) then how remarkable that it was thought appropriate to launch into a debate that would only cause further division and stress!

The key topic up for debate was the issue of human sexuality and marriage. Opposing motions on this matter were supplied by the progressive and conservative wings of the church and – predictably enough – only further cemented existing divisions. Restraint and humility on both evangelical and progressive sides would have served the church much better.

Thankfully, I suspect that for most of you this will not mean very much at all. But the issue does have the potential to have wide repercussions, that may be felt even here over time. And it does highlight the real need for an authentic catholic voice in our church. We – as Catholic Anglicans - have lived with a difficult and far from ideal compromise in our church. For us who have stayed, we have carved out our niche and made our peace. Mindful that the gift of peace is one of Christ's gifts to his church, a lack of peace must be taken very seriously indeed.

But the witness of an authentic catholic voice is also a gift to *the wider church*. For the council at Jerusalem, the presenting issue wasn't actually the issue. It wasn't about circumcision. It was about the implications of the gospel! The presenting issue *we* face in our context isn't about human sexuality. Not really. We Catholics have been here before, and once more, the question is one of authority: *who do we listen to? What ultimately shapes and directs our faith?* It's a question as old as Anglicanism. The progressives claim the faith is understood, and scripture is to be interpreted, in the light of experience, often thinly veiled under the label of 'reason'. But mostly it is about aligning the mind of the church with the mind of the world. The spirit of God is conflated with the spirit of the age. Evangelicals with their *sola scriptura* approach can only look to the bible to inform their faith and their place in the world, and argue that the bible interprets itself. The result being competing and contradictory interpretations and an intractable impasse. And rather than listening, there is shouting with neither side being heard, resulting in suspicion and antagonism, which is where we currently are. A witness we might say, *against* the gospel. Nothing could be further from the spirit that guided the council at Jerusalem.

But the Catholic position is that our authority *is* the faith catholic, that it is anchored in the scriptures and so enables us to engage with our context without running adrift! It is the faith handed on, the faith we have received, that provides the interpretive framework. When Our Lord in the gospel today promises that the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, will lead us into all truth, it is not as to a *tabula rasa*, as to an empty vessel. The Spirit of living God guides the living church not to innovation but to remembrance! We are led into truth precisely from those things Christ has handed on. And it is these - guarded, preserved, and handed on – that we possess! The *true authority* is Jesus Christ who continues to live and speak in the witness of the catholic faith. Anchored in this, we should not be afraid to speak and act, and pursue peace.