

**Sermon Preached at St. Peter's Church, Devizes
at the Sung Mass on Trinity 8 – Sunday 13 July 2008**

by Fr Peter Moss SSC – Priest-in-Charge

Personally, I have no taste for controversy. I am not attracted by church politics, and I look upon those who are with suspicion. It seems to me that, in general, neither of these things has any place in the pulpit – nor do people come to church to hear about them.

But when issues of **faith** and **order** are involved – as they were last week in General Synod, it is a different matter.

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8)*

...or, as Bishop Michael, our preacher at Glastonbury this year reminded us:

‘God has called you to be different.’

(This was not, incidentally, my original choice of text...but Deuteronomy 27:17 – ‘*Cursed be he who removes his neighbour's landmark*’ – presented too many spiritual temptations!)

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+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the opening sentence of his little book ‘A Priest to the Temple’, our Anglican father (and saint in waiting) George Herbert wrote:

*A pastor is the deputy of Christ for the reducing of man (of course, he means woman, too!) to
the obedience of God.’*

Being ‘*reduced*’ doesn’t sound very comfortable, but the keyword here is ‘obedience’ – the obedience of God.

Herbert’s words powerfully describe one of the **two religions** being practised at the present time under the one umbrella of ‘Anglican inclusiveness’. It is a religion (a path) of obedience, and it is founded upon the conviction that God has, in his love and goodness, revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. His revelation is trustworthy and complete. He has shown himself to us as he really is. If we give ourselves to Christ, we can learn from him what God’s will is. The only limits to our knowledge of God are those we put upon ourselves by our weakness, our unwillingness to turn to Christ and do as he tells us. Our guides in all this are Holy Scripture, written (and interpreted by the Undivided Church of the first ten centuries) under the sure and certain leading of God the Holy Spirit. (What has happened since then, after the division of East from West, and Protestant from Catholic, is open to some question; but what comes from the Undivided Church we can rely upon.)

This is the path upon which the Church of England continued to walk after the break with Rome – and it has been the path followed by Anglican churches across the world, founded by missionaries from these islands...until very recently.

If God should choose to create man in his image as male and female (*'Male and female created he them'* - Genesis 1:27b), so be it!

If God should choose to become incarnate, to become one of us, in the male, so be it! (In the world as he made it, he *could not* be completely human – as he *had* to be to do for us what he willed, and we needed – and be genderless!)

If God should choose to order his Church in such a way that men and women have different parts to play in its life, so be it! (It is, after all, his Church, with the life of his Son flowing through its veins!)

If God should choose that marriage should be the union of one man with one woman – a parable of the communion we have with Christ in the life of the Church, his Bride – and not a union of man with man, or woman with woman, so be it!

That is **the religion of obedience**, the first of the two religions.

The second is **very different**.

It is founded upon a belief that God has given us a sense of what is right and wrong and **that he endorses** what we have come passionately (with every fibre of our being) to believe to be right and just. If we believe in God's love, those who follow this path argue, we must act upon our deepest convictions – live them out. Truth is relative to the time in which people are living. Common sense tells us that Jesus was conditioned in important ways by the thinking of his age. If he were here now, he would do things differently. Those of our fellow Anglicans who take this path have been led to see the world and the people in it as being (more or less) just as God intended them to be. They should be accepted as they are ...without 'discrimination'. If they want to be, they should be fully included in the Church. Christians in the Church should celebrate and affirm them as God made them.

As you can see, the two paths, or different views of religion, are **very different**...

It was clearly unavoidable that these two very different 'faiths' in Anglicanism would eventually need to live and flourish – if they were both to flourish – in separate and parallel jurisdictions in the church...

Or that one should 'take power' and throw the other out.

As a result of General Synod's vote last Monday, it is the second of these two things that has happened – and we 'traditionalists' or 'catholics' are the 'losers'. They have '*removed our landmark*'!

We have known for some time that a particular group, or alliance of groups, in the Church of England have been hell-bent on making sure that women are consecrated bishops in England without delay. As they chant on the picket lines: 'When do we want it? NOW!' (I use the phrase 'hell-bent' deliberately and without any sense of satisfaction. Scripture teaches us that the signs that the Father of lies is at work are (i) division, and (ii) ...lies. The campaign for the consecration of women bishops, coming on the back of the earlier push for the ordination of women as priests, has given rise to both – divisions and lies – in plenty. The chief lie is that we have - and will *continue* to have – an 'honoured place' in the re-ordered C. of E., and could expect to be justly treated when it came to appointments and safeguards. Many young priests of our persuasion believed this and went forward for training and ordination. (I was privileged to walk with one of them in the procession at Glastonbury.) They – and their families – are now in great difficulty.

So **what happened** in General Synod on Monday?

Against the advice of the two archbishops, a number of senior bishops and the leaders of the Houses of Clergy and Laity, General Synod decided that a law should be drawn up to enable women to be made bishops **and that it should create no legally binding safeguards** for those who could not in conscience (as we cannot) accept their ministry and sacraments...because **we just couldn't be sure whether they would be bishops in God's eyes or not**. There would instead be a 'Code of Practice' asking the bishop of each diocese to make his (or her!) own arrangements for us to be 'looked after'.

Is this **so** bad?

We need to look at **what we have now** and **what we would have** if such a Measure without safeguards goes through. ('Measure' is church-speak for 'law'.)

At present we have **Resolutions A and B**. These make it illegal for a woman 'priest' to celebrate Holy Communion, or to give Absolution, in St. Peter's church – or for the Bishop of Salisbury to appoint a woman as priest-in-charge here. (Such safeguards are an admission that no one can be entirely sure whether women priests are really priests in the Church of God, or not. Note that absolutely **nothing that would need to happen** in the Church to dispel such doubt **has** happened in the years since 1992!)

Resolutions A & B would be removed.

We also have Bishop Andrew because we have passed **Resolution C** under the Code of Practice known as the Act of Synod. This means that the pastoral care of this congregation and the sacramental life of this parish have been put into his hands. He is our bishop – so we can be **sure** that the sacraments and teaching we receive here are the very sacraments and teaching Christ gave to his apostles to be handed down to us.

When I go to the altar, it isn't really me who goes. If we could clone a hundred or so copies of + Andrew, **he** would celebrate Mass in every church that he cares for each Sunday. But we can't. So I go up those steps to represent him. When I speak here, I speak **only** the traditional teaching I know he wants me to give. If he heard I was doing anything else, he would soon be on the phone – or I should receive a hot email...

He, too, would be **abolished**.

(He was instituting a new priest somewhere in Cornwall when the synod debate was going on; and in a deeply sad email, he wrote: 'It was a good occasion, though as I was preaching and urging common action in the service of the Gospel, I was aware that in York my job description was being demolished as I spoke.' The priest in question was a man of only 48.)

What would we have **then**, under a basically voluntary Code of Practice, which each diocesan bishop would be required to 'have regard to'?

A male bishop of his choosing, who would come and 'fix' confirmations, and probably ordain (if need be), and bless the oils. There would be no guarantee that such a bishop would share our catholic and apostolic beliefs: he might just be willing to do it to help the diocese out...our out of misplaced pity.

If I – or any of you – want advice, we can contact + Andrew, knowing that we can rely on his catholic and apostolic faith, his care and his good judgement – and we should get an answer in less than twenty-four hours. Under the new arrangements, there could be no trust. It would be a case of 'the less we see of *him*, the better'.

Being in the See of Ebbsfleet is something special. We are the Body of Christ. a church-in-little under its head. We know each other; we know him; he knows us. It sounds like St. John Chapter 10 – and it is!

But a majority has decided to use its muscle to bring the so-called 'open period of reception' to a sudden end **and** to put an end to an expression of Christian faith and life in the Sees of Ebbsfleet (and Richborough, and Beverley) that represents what the Church of England (as past only of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church) **has always believed about herself**.

It is, one suspects, what they would have done in 1992 if they had thought they could get away with it. But the then Ecclesiastical Committee of the Privy Council said otherwise; and they knew that, if they wanted their Women Priests Measure, they would have to make 'concessions'. This time they think they can get it through without compromise – and Mr. Robert Key MP (one of its present members and a representative of Salisbury Diocese on General Synod) is busily assuring us all that they can!

The reasons they give for doing all this have, as Bishop John Broadhurst has said, 'nothing to do with Christian faith and life, and everything to do with the fashionable "rights" agenda' - actually he said, 'the feminist agenda'.

In taking this decision, General Synod is not only undermining the Church of England's understanding of itself as catholic and apostolic. (Remember that in the Church of God issues of faith and order are **never** settled by a show of hands but by **common agreement** – however long it takes. And common agreement on this and the associated sexuality agenda **there most certainly is not!**)

General Synod is also setting the feelings of those women, about whose orders there is and must continue to be serious doubt, above church principles and above 2000 years of unbroken tradition – not to speak of the feelings of those who will be unchurched by their Measure.

The underlying principles behind synod's decision (if you can call them that) are **secular, worldly** – and have little to do with the Gospel.

I quote:

'The church by law established is actually now *in step with the country and what people want*' (Mr. Robert Key – my italics)

'There has been a sea-change in *society's attitude to women and leadership in particular* and all forms of discrimination in general' (Mr. James Humphery – again my italics)

My thoughts are not your thoughts'?

'...called to be different'?

It seems not!

Beside God's revelation, of course, the Laws of England are but chaff; and any act or decision of a synod that conflicts with catholic and apostolic truth is not worth the paper it's written on – in principle at least. (Churchman of earlier generations could have been relied upon to understand this!)

None the less, Synod legislation has the force of law – and three Appeal Court judges in the late 1990's ruled that General Synod has the legal right to change even the Creeds, if it wants.

So what should we do?

Nothing for the moment except pray for each other and for our persecutors – as Christians should always do. All is not (entirely) lost. There are points at which a Women Bishops Measure can be derailed – as happened earlier this year in the Church in Wales. Meanwhile as things 'move on', **we must stay together**. + Andrew is still our bishop, and he is working to find us a way forward together. I shall stay at St. Peter's as long as I can. The teaching here will remain **Scriptural** and **orthodox** and the sacraments secure – as Article XXV in the Book of Common Prayer says they should be.

Reconstructed (or 'new') Anglicanism, built on the shifting sands of modern knowledge and 'what the nation feels is right' stops on the other side of St. Peter's church door – if it's lucky enough to get through the porch!

We must remember, too, that **what God has done for us in Christ** and all the '**inestimable benefits**' we have to thank him for **are untouched** by the aberrations of the General Synod of two small provinces of the universal Church – however dishonourably and despicably Synod has behaved.

'The seed is the word of God,

Christ the sower.

Whoever finds this seed lives for ever.'

And this remains true for us all – yesterday, today and for ever!

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are my ways your ways, says the Lord.*

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,

so are my ways higher than your ways

and my thoughts than your thoughts.

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.