

The Integrity of the Church

Exodus 32 vv 7-14 p91, Psalm 51, I Timothy 1 vv 12-17 p1191, Luke 15 vv 1-10 p1048

Two issues seem to threaten the integrity of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion – that world-wide family of churches which are in fellowship with the see of Canterbury. These issues are the ordination of women as bishops and the recognition of homosexual relationships as legitimate and even blessed. What the two issues have in common is that their opponents claim that they are contrary to the plain meaning of Scripture, as understood by God's Church for 2,000 years, that they divide us from other much larger Churches, which do not intend to deviate from the faith once delivered to the saints, and that they undermine our mission to a world which desperately needs the eternal, simple Good News of God in Jesus Christ; whereas supporters, both of women's ordination and of the blessing of gay relationships, claim that these are authentic developments of the faith once delivered to the saints in the light of modern knowledge, that we have to be true to our insights as Anglicans rather than to look over our shoulders for the approval of Rome and Orthodoxy, and that our unwillingness to modernise and embrace equality and diversity in the realm of gender and sexuality makes our whole message incomprehensible to twenty-first century people. It has to be said, of course, that these are not the first issues to threaten to divide the Church and we are all sadly aware that God's Church is already fractured into a multiplicity of denominations: Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican and myriad kinds of Protestant.

In this context I was asked in what circumstances I would leave the Church of England. I am not sure that I can answer that question hypothetically. The rest of this sermon will be devoted to the integrity of the Church of God. The Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. She is the Body of Christ and the Bride of Christ. The Church is the Temple of the Holy Spirit. She is the family of God, the people of God, a royal priesthood. I am not sure that it would be possible to remain a Christian if one left the Church altogether. I rather think that it would not. To leave one Church and to found another would be a remarkable thing to do. The founder of a new denomination has either identified a very serious error or failure in the existing Churches, or else he is astonishingly arrogant. To leave one Church and to join another already existing Church would raise all sorts of questions about one's true beliefs and one's relationships with one's fellow Christians both in the new fellowship and in the old one. What honest reasons could one give for making such a change?

On the other hand, there are things which could put one's membership of a particular Church under serious strain. It might be hard to belong to a Church if you thought its teaching on matters of doctrine or ethics was at fault or if you felt that your Church generally did not live up to its preaching. It might be hard to belong to a Church whose public worship generally left you feeling bored or embarrassed, rather than inspired and empowered. It might be hard to belong to a Church if you found it hard to get on with the other people in it, the ministers or the people in the pews. At what point do you decide that it is so difficult for you to remain within a given Church that you should change to another one? After all, the fault might as easily lie in you as it might in other members of the fellowship. Bear in mind that you aren't going to find a perfect Church on earth and, if you did, you would only spoil it by joining it.

So I try to approach the question *in what circumstances would I leave the Church of England* from the point of view of the essential integrity of the Church. The Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. The Church is the Body of Christ. There is only one Christ. So there can only be one Church. Christ is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit in the eternal unity of the Blessed Holy Trinity. Christ is in us. The Father is in us. The Holy Spirit is in us. We then, through His grace, are one with God. We are one with Him in Baptism. We are one with Him in Holy Communion. We are one with Him in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. It follows that, if we are one with God, we are one with each other. We are members of the same Body, the Body of Christ.

God is love and the eternal relationship of the three persons of the Holy Trinity is love. Infinite, eternal love overflows to create us, to sustain us and to enfold us. The love of God invites us to respond by becoming people of love. We are invited to love God. If we love God, then we must love one another, both because we are ourselves filled with the love of God and because other people are loved by the God Whom we seek as our life-long partner, indeed as our eternal soul mate. We fall short of this vision as individuals and as churches, but to fall short is to sin.

We believe in *the holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints, the Forgiveness of sins, the Resurrection of the body, And the life everlasting*. In the heavenly Kingdom, we are risen, we live for ever. We enjoy an eternal communion of love with God and with all God's people. This is so because our sins are forgiven. Sins are our failure to love. Sin is what divides us from God and from one another. We believe in *the holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints, the Forgiveness of sins, the Resurrection of the body, And the life everlasting* because *We believe in the Holy Ghost*, the Spirit of the Father Who made the world, the Spirit of Jesus, Who was made one with us, died on the cross, rose again from the dead and will come again to take us home to Himself.

Our life in the Church on earth ought to be a foretaste of the life of Heaven and a demonstration to the world of what God's purposes are on earth. Our worship on earth participates in the worship of heaven. Our prayers are heard in Heaven. Our fellowship, our friendship as Christians on earth is an aspect of the communion of saints. Holy Communion is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. The Holy Scriptures bear witness to the Eternal Word. The life of the Church on earth reflects the life of the angels and archangels and all the company of Heaven. The fellowship of the Church sustains us as Christians and, because we are part of that fellowship, we sustain the Church. The fellowship of the Church so reflects the Light of Heaven that she bears witness of God to the world. A supposedly Christian nation which imagined that *you can be a Christian without going to Church* begat millions of feeble Christians, a weak Church and a post Christian generation which knows little of God or of what it means to be truly human. The Church cannot do without Christians and neither can we do without the Church. It would be verging on the blasphemous to claim that God cannot do without us, but I do believe that His plan for the salvation of the world includes us and that the Church of which we are members exists in order to show the world the love of God. Whatever difficulties and discouragements there are in belonging to the Church, it is vital for us to persevere for our own sake, for God's sake and for the world's sake.