

Why I'm an Anglican – Trinity 11 2012
 Proverbs 9¹⁻⁶ p642, Ephesians 5¹⁵⁻²⁰ p1176, John 6⁵¹⁻⁵⁸ p1071

In this week when we celebrate the 350th anniversary of the BCP, it might be worth thinking about what is special about the Church of England. The fact that we don't often do so is one of the things we have to celebrate. The Church of England is a relatively modest Church. We have never claimed to be the one true Church, only a part of it. We've never thought that members of other Christian churches were damned.

I sometimes surprise myself when I realise how evangelical I really am. When I really come to think about any issue that matters I rediscover time and time again that I am a Bible-believing Christian. I'm sorry, but that's what I am and, to be honest, I can't really see how it is possible for people to claim to be Christians and yet not to accept the authority of the Bible or to respect the teaching of the Church. If we don't accept that God reveals Himself objectively and outside our own heads, we are in danger either of making up our own religion or of implicitly claiming that God makes Himself known to us personally and to the people who share our ideas in a way that He does not make Himself known to other cultures and other ages.

And the Church of England scores really highly on the Bible. The 1622 Prayer Book and Common Worship are highly biblical documents. By and large in the Church of England we don't have written tests of faith. The words of our prayers are what we believe and that is why it is so important that in our public worship we use those forms of words which are authorised or permitted for use in the Church of England. Of the two books, I love the language of the BCP. It is one of the classics of English literature and there is a very good case to be made for worshipping in language which is as worthy as possible of the One Whom we are worshipping. On the other hand, Common Worship has a flexibility which very often makes it more appropriate as an expression of authentic worship for a modern congregation. I personally am open to the merits of both.

As good Protestants, we Anglicans do not require anyone to believe anything which cannot be proved from Scripture. This is where we differ from the Roman Catholics who believe that sometimes God does lead His Church to define things that were not defined when the final *Amen* was written to the New Testament. Councils of the Church, Synods, etc., we believe, cannot define doctrine or compel conscience. Thus one of our weaknesses is actually our great strength. It looks bad that we can't come to an agreement on issues like women bishops or homosexuality but the reason we can't is that we respect the consciences of those who can't agree. We don't want to excommunicate anyone and we respect the right of all our members to say, *On my prayerful reading of Scripture I am sorry but I cannot accept what the majority has decided.*

I am sorry to say that the Church of England's hands have not always been clean in the matter of persecuting other Christians, but persecutions in England have usually been tied up with politics. The Church of England (though not of course the Anglican Church in other countries) has always been closely connected with the English Crown, with government and parliament. In the time of Queen Elizabeth I Roman Catholics were believed to be supporting the claims of King Philip of Spain to the English throne. In the time of the Stuart Kings, non-conformist Protestants were connected with movements which wished to overthrow the established order.

Church of England missionaries and chaplains to ex-patriot communities founded Churches like ours, Anglican Churches, throughout the world and these have not become established Churches like the Church of England. They thrive in countries where the government is secular like the United States or the culture is predominantly Roman Catholic such as much of South America and Europe or Hindu, Moslem or Buddhist as in much of Asia.

Whatever the formal relationship between Church and state, however, it makes no sense at all to me to think that the state can be neutral in terms of religion or moral philosophy. There is no such thing as neutrality – only truth or falsehood. Our values have to come from somewhere (unless we just make them up). As a Christian, I believe that all our values come from God. The moral law is God's Law. Individuals would be happier if they lived by the Ten Commandments. The country would be better governed if it were governed on Christian principles. That is what I unashamedly preach. It is how I unashamedly vote. I am perfectly happy to pray that all those in authority in this land under our Queen *may truly and indifferently minister justice, to the punishment of wickedness and vice, and to the maintenance of thy true religion and virtue*. This does not, however, mean that I would countenance the persecution of people who hold a different view or that I would exclude them from our decision-making bodies including parliament. To do so would, in my opinion, be contrary to God's perfect Law of Love. We can all learn from one another and I am liberal enough to believe that the Truth will ultimately prevail through honest dialogue.

I acknowledge that one very strong reason for my being an Anglican is that I was brought up in the Church of England and loyalty is important. I have, however, shared fellowship with Roman Catholics and with Baptists, Congregationalists (as they were then), Pentecostals and Free Evangelicals. I've told you why I am not a Roman Catholic. I wouldn't want to belong to a Church which requires its members to believe anything that cannot be proved from Scripture. But why Church of England rather than one of these other Protestant Churches? I must admit it's partly a question of taste. I'm more comfortable when things are done *decently and in order*, rather than more informally in a *charismatic* or *happy clappy* framework. Much more importantly, I am concerned that these non-conformist churches undervalue the Church as a spiritual entity. I do believe in *one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church* and I do so because I believe it is what the Bible teaches. I feel that non-conformist Protestants overemphasise the individual and the local congregation at the expense of a sense of mutual belonging to *the whole state of Christ's Church militant here in earth*. Our belonging to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church is, I feel, bound up with our having the three-fold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons in common with most other Christians throughout the world. I also believe very strongly that as Holy Communion is the service Jesus gave His Church, it should normally be what we do when we come together for worship every Lord's Day. Don't you this is the implication of today's Gospel?

So, in conclusion, what I believe that the Church of England and worldwide Anglicanism have going for them is that we include the insights of both Catholicism and Protestantism within a framework of rationality and tolerance. Let me apologise for any unAnglican immodesty.