

Parish Priest's Report 2005

Earlier this year an enthusiastic young Christian at ECU asked me what sort of Anglican I am. 'Are you evangelical or liberal?' He needed to know, he explained, because he had to be able to trust me, and trusting me depends on me believing the whole truth. Evangelicals, by definition it would seem, believe the whole truth of God in Christ. Liberals, on the other hand, have watered down the truth to suit themselves, throwing out the baby with the bathwater. This student was somewhat nonplussed when I said I was neither evangelical nor liberal, but confusion really set in when I refused to go on and label myself.

By resisting being pigeonholed so casually, I hoped this rather engaging and promising young man might go away and think some more. If he wants to trust me he needs to take the time to get to know me, and allow me to get to know him. Such a process cannot be short-circuited or fast-tracked by trading slogans. It is not a matter of the like-minded agreeing to agree, or dealing with difference by agreeing to disagree. It is not a matter of toleration or rejection, of drawing boundaries to include or exclude, just as the world is not a contest between true and false, black and white. Life is about welcoming each other unreservedly and delighting in discovering each other, for we are all made in the divine image and likeness, all daughters and sons of God, sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ, the human manifestation of true divinity and real humanity, unclouded and unblemished. We are the composite face of God. Together, we are the Body of Christ. When this other David and I become friends, as I hope and pray we will, he will discover that I am more complex than his labels, more complex than my own labels. I am neither evangelical nor liberal. I am both, and I am more.

What do I mean by this?

A closer look at the labels helps clarify precisely what is at stake here.

The word evangelical is bandied about and shouted from the rooftops, but who is really evangelical? Evangelical indicates fidelity to the evangel, literally fidelity to the good news of the gospel. In other words, it denotes people who take scripture seriously, paying close attention to the written word as the primary and normative witness to the living Word of God, the embodied Word who transcends all words, the embodied word who is the crucified and raised Jesus Christ.

Paying close attention means reading scripture as carefully and intelligently and faithfully as we can. It means patient study and scholarly debate and prayerful interpretation. It means fearlessly acknowledging differences in interpretation without taking fright and unchurching one another. Taking scripture seriously demands humility, the humility to respect one another's integrity, especially when we disagree. That my reading may be wrong and your reading may be right indicates the arrogance of isolated voices, demonstrating just how much we need each other. As the blessed Pope John XXII liked to say, it takes many people to be intelligent.

In Anglicanism, of course, this great evangelical tradition is rightly celebrated as central to our history and identity. Hopefully, every Christian is in this sense evangelical. I trust this evangelicalism is recognizable in my own preaching and

teaching, in the pastoral care I exercise and in my leadership style. After all, absolutely everything depends on individual disciples and church communities being truly and authentically Christian. What the living presence of the Easter Jesus enables us to do, little by little, and with an awful lot of false steps, is to discern when and where our gatherings are in fact signs of Kingdom come, and when they are just 'the leaven of the Pharisees' – the pious disguise of religiosity we are always tempted to restore. We are in the business of telling the truth and recognizing the genuine article and truth is evangelical and reality is evangelical.

When we ask real evangelicals to please stand up, we find ourselves in a great cloud of witnesses, where all the limited brand-names and membership badges crumble and fall away. It also becomes clear that many who rejoice to call themselves evangelical are nothing of the sort. They are simply ideological protestants, a new race of puritans with a very specific agenda, namely to make the world and the church over in their own image and likeness, imposing their own idiosyncratic reading – what they stridently call the 'plain' reading of scripture - on absolutely everyone without exception. In achieving this end, any means will do, including lies and blackmail and violence. Fighting dirty is certainly not considered out of bounds. Not that our home-grown puritans have any monopoly on tactics in this warfare. Across the board, fundamentalists share a particular mindset and narrowness, making them exceptionally dangerous to life and liberty. Christian 'evangelicals' are no better and no worse than Jewish 'evangelicals' and Muslim 'evangelicals'. They are equally ruthless in their attitudes and equally unscrupulous in their methods. Convinced they and they alone are right, such fanatics believe error has no rights. They will do what they have to do, and nothing on earth will stop them. Conveniently, they forget that the ends never justify the means. Indeed, for serious servants of God, the means **are** the end.

It is no news to you that I dispute the neo-puritan claim that they alone possess the pure gospel in its fullness, while wicked liberals are whittling away this truth to suit themselves. In any case, none of us possess the gospel; hopefully, the gospel possesses us. It is worth recalling how Archbishop William Temple defended himself when he stood accused seventy years ago of liberalism, watering down the faith to see what average Mr Jones could swallow. 'I am not concerned with seeing what Mr Jones can swallow', he emphatically declared. 'I **am** Mr Jones asking what there is to eat'. As far as I can tell, this is not a matter of choice. We who live twenty and thirty centuries after scripture was written cannot read it as if it fell complete from the sky this morning, written in plain English, handsomely calf-bound and gilt-edged as any holy book should be. It will not wash to say every syllable is 'God-breathed' and is therefore to be taken at face value, as if this closes the conversation rather than opening it up.

Ancient documents are taken seriously only when they are actually treated as ancient documents, composed in distant cultures, written in foreign tongues. The first question must always be, 'what did the writer intend when writing this?' Unless we are serious in seeking an answer, any interpretation of our own is likely to be sheer fantasy. Until we become patient students of the originals, whatever we claim to see through rose-tinted glasses is a forgery. The second question is, 'what have these writings meant in the history of God's people?' Only fools set aside centuries of prayer and study and debate, expecting to open the bible at random and understand what it says. We stand gratefully on the shoulders of our mothers and fathers in faith, hearing the word in good company. Only then do we ask, 'what is

God saying to us now?’ In other words, we take the given realities seriously; we take seriously the specifics of time and place, more seriously than any prior theory about the inerrancy or infallibility of scripture.

When and where and by whom was this written? How did it become scripture? Why did the church include it in the canon or rule of its life, while rejecting similar books? What sort of literature are we dealing with – history, apocalyptic, parable, poetry, or prose? What did it say then, what has it said across the years of living tradition, and what does it say now?

In other words, translation is always the name of the game, and this inescapable task demands all our wit and wisdom. It also demands confidence that the enlightening Spirit is active now and always in us and between us, leading us into all truth. Unlike Islam, where Arabic is God’s native tongue, Judaism and Christianity have never insisted the bible be read in the original Hebrew and Greek. In our tradition, translation is not only possible but necessary. For the biblical witness is not itself revelation. Scripture tells the fascinating story of divine self-disclosure to seers and sages and prophets, recording the mighty acts of God in human history. In this sense, scripture is always one step removed from the actual event, recording God’s encounters with real human beings and written by real human beings who function as rather more than obedient stenographers. Is there really any need to suppose that the authors of scripture are inspired by God in any way differently to Shakespeare writing a play or Mozart writing a symphony or Picasso taking up his brush to paint? Grace does not obliterate graces, God’s gift overriding the gifts of individual personality, reducing human beings to mere puppets or cyphers. Rather, divine grace enhances and perfects all that lies in us.

To make these points and ask such questions is not faithless. Neither is it capricious, just a mischievous matter of temperament - although a little mischief certainly wouldn’t go astray in the current humourless climate. Beware, I say, religious zealots who cannot laugh at themselves! Anyway, if this is what it means to be liberal, then I am certainly liberal. It follows, of course, that I immediately want to insist that liberal is not necessarily pejorative, a swear word wielded as a weapon in our ideological battles. Liberalism frequently denotes our honest attempt to be genuinely evangelical in the world as it is, taking the facts of life seriously in the light of the gospel. In any Christian community worth the name, evangelicals and liberals live side by side, because neither has the fullness of truth, because the splendour of truth possesses them both and needs both. Anglicanism at its best is never monochrome. At our best, diversity is not compromise for the sake of peace, but comprehensiveness for the sake of truth.

I am neither evangelical nor liberal. I am both, and I am more. This declaration is not simply a position into which I have argued myself, the result of consistent intellectual endeavor, although I hope there is some sustainable logic to what I am proposing. And my ambition is not to maneuver you into a similar mindset or persuade you to a similar conclusion. When I am honest, I admit that theories and theologies are all based in experience, for experience of God’s grace is prior to all our theories and theologies. In a word, this enterprise has more to do with heart than head. Revelation happens, and only later do we reflect on the event, the meaning of this particular encounter with God. At first, we are simply overwhelmed, dumb-

struck in wonder, love and silent praise. Only at a distance, with the gift of hindsight, but with no less awe, just like the prophets and evangelists themselves, do we begin to speak of what God did and talk of what God does. And revelation is not necessarily, or even primarily, individual, a cozy tête-à-tête between my God and me. Perhaps more commonly it is communal, an experience we have together, a shared encounter. For me it has always been the eucharistic experience, the round-table meeting where friends and strangers sit down to eat and drink together, when all we really have in common is Christ the host of the meal. So when I am asked what sort of Anglican I am, or indeed what sort of Christian I am, the picture conjured up in my mind is not a balance sheet of rational propositions fighting a duel among themselves, but the assembly of God's people on the Lord's day.

There is, however, nothing general about this. It is quite specific, and I have a particular church in mind. It is one where women and men, adults and kids, mature and immature, single and married and divorced, gay and straight, white and black, high and low, new-comers and old hands, evangelical and liberal explore the mystery together. It is a place where people live and positively flourish in harmony, not because they are all alike, not because they hold the same social or political or religious views, not because they all have good jobs or above average children, not because they are doctrinally orthodox, let alone morally pure, but simply and solely because Christ sets his table before them and gathers them into one. In this place the miracle actually happens again and again and week after week: scripture speaks, sacraments are celebrated, the blind see, the sick are healed, and the dead raised to life. I know a number of such places, not a huge number it must be confessed, but enough to stave off despair, enough to keep hope alive. And this is undoubtedly one such place, and for me at least the principal arena, this holy place and this blessed community. And the proper name really is grace, Grace Anglican Church, where not a bit of it is our own construction, where all of it is down to God's free gift lavished upon us.

Like you, I am sometimes conservative, sometimes radical, sometimes clear, sometimes confused, sometimes sensitive, sometimes clumsy, sometimes right, sometimes wrong. I am evangelical and liberal, but I am more. It is not only possible but essential to be both orthodox and open, simultaneously deeply traditional and entirely free with the glorious freedom of the children of God. What sort of Anglican are you? What sort of Christian are you? I am a catholic Christian and a catholic Anglican, but not yet sufficiently catholic, for true catholicism embraces all these tags and conditions and shapes and sizes and then some. Only God is catholic, while the rest of us remain sectarian of one stripe or another. The catholic church in the full sense of the word, universal and complete, simply hasn't happened yet. But we are not to wait around until that bright day dawns somewhere else, somewhere out there on the horizon where they have the talent and the courage for such adventures. It is our vocation to be the true church of Jesus Christ, the catholic church of the ages, right here and now, even when all we have is a handful of loaves and a few fish.

The unbounded generosity of God whose deathless love holds all things in being makes space for everyone, whoever we are, wherever we have been, whatever we have done or failed to do, inviting us to be equally hospitable and welcoming and forgiving and nurturing. There is a place at the Lord's table with my name on it, and

another with your name on it. In a time of huge anxiety, when the churches are at least as fearful about the future as anyone on the planet, this image of the hospitable table where every hunger is satisfied takes on immediate and concrete significance. Anything less betrays Christ and his cross, so every attempt to narrow down the generosity of God to sensible and acceptable limits is to be resisted. Excommunication, like war, belongs to the tragic past, an unambiguous sign of human failure and sin. In God's new world there is no place for expelling or exiling one another, nowhere safe to run and hide. When the church plays at judging who is worthy and who is not, who is within the circle and who is beyond the pail, it becomes a laughing stock or a stumbling block. What a joke to tell the bishops who ordained Bishop Gene Robinson to stand in the corner until they promise not to be naughty any more! What a scandal to ever imagine we can limit God's mercy!! The Lord's table is never our table, just as it is never us who decide who may feast here. The only prerequisite at this banquet is hunger, and catholicism means 'here comes everyone'.