

CHRIST THE KING 2012 - RECTOR'S SERMON

Jesus says to Pilate, 'My kingdom is not of this world'.

Do you want me to say something about the vote on women bishops; or would you prefer me to give an uplifting spiritual message about Christ the King without any reference to these goings-on? I've thought carefully about this, and concluded that I must say something, because it has been a major news story of the week, and no doubt you, like me, will have been questioned about it - perhaps dismissively, or in puzzlement - by family, friends, correspondents. Like others wearing a clerical collar in the streets or on public transport this week, I have certainly been quizzed as to what's going on. And you might indeed have some questions about it yourself.

But what I'm going to say does (I hope) relate to today's theme of Christ's kingly reign, and our discipleship under his authority. It's a test case of the principle that Abp Rowan has commended to his successor: *preach the word of God with the bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other.* (He refrained from saying which one - but on this issue they were all singing from the same hymn sheet.) And let's also see this issue in the perspective of the other stories in this week's newspapers, life-and-death stories: critical developments in the middle East, for example; or indeed the good news story (not picked up by most of the press) from the church in Zimbabwe, where at long last the law courts have returned churches and other property to their rightful owners after their shameful expropriation by Kunonga. Christ the King is suffering, Christ the King is triumphing, in parts of the world far removed from our domestic tiffs, in all the places where his disciples are seeking to be faithful.

Almost everyone agrees that last Tuesday was a disaster, on various levels. In the words of Justin Welby, our future Archbishop, it was a grim day for the Church of England. It was a grim day for ordained women in our church (of whom there are now over 3,000). Much media coverage has focussed on them: every national and local newspaper has sought out women priests to interview. With a few glaring exceptions, none of them expects or aspires to be a bishop herself, but all have spoken of sorrow and distress and dismay, and in some cases deep anger. This range of feelings is shared by the many male priests and bishops, and lay members of the church up and down the land, who were longing for the church finally to give a resounding and non-grudging 'yes' to the possibility of women bishops after 20 years of argument. But... don't despair, our bishops have been telling us (Bishop Adrian has been working hard on this in the last few days, supporting us all in our bewilderment). Just be patient for a little longer (something Christians are used to doing).

However, more immediately, and troublingly, it was a grim day for the reputation of the church, a public relations disaster showing us to be out of touch with contemporary society, losing our way and our grip on reality. That's something that must concern us all, wherever we might stand on this issue. With characteristic understatement, Abp Rowan has said *the church has a lot of explaining to do.*

Few people out there will be interested in some of these explanations. They don't care about the details of General Synod's voting system, even though it's fairly straightforward: final approval of a measure requires a two-thirds majority in each section (bishops, clergy and laity). This is a high hurdle (we might compare it with the recent election of police commissioners, some of whom were voted in on a 15% turnout); but it's one which the church deliberately and rightly sets to make sure that our actions command the maximum possible assent, so that we can dare to say *it seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us* (though it's a moot point whether the will of the Holy Spirit can really be discerned through majority votes, however committed we are to the democratic process).

In the event, there was a 74% majority overall, but it failed to achieve the two-thirds majority in the House of Laity - by just six votes. The bishops gave a strong lead: only three voted against, with two abstaining (which would have been three if +Richard had not been unwell on the day). So why is it, they are asking, that in a church which is *episcopally led and synodically governed* (as the official formula puts it) we did not follow the lead of our leaders? And how do we square this with the fact that 42 out of 44 diocesan synods supported the legislation (some of them very strongly; even in London, one of the two against, there were only a couple of votes in it)? Those at General Synod who voted against will say, rightly, we are not delegates: we vote according to our conscience and convictions. But there are things to be explained, and action to be taken, about the deeply unrepresentative nature of our national church parliament. (When I was a member, I was part of the Open Synod Group, which worked hard for dialogue across the traditions - but there were not many of us.)

People out there - and many in the church too - will not be interested in (or indeed will completely reject) explanations about arcane theological issues: about the need for sacramental assurance, which some believe no woman, however able, can provide; or about the doctrine of male headship, which denies women authority both in the home and in the church. The slogan here is that women and men are created 'equal but different' - as if anyone imagined that they were 'equal but the same'! Those who hold these positions, for their various reasons, do not believe that women can or should be ordained, either as priests let alone as bishops. And yet they say, we recognise that the church as a whole has said yes, they can and should be ordained, so like everyone else we long to see them accepted, 'if the terms are right'. How can that be, the puzzled outsider might well say, when the only obstacle to their being accepted is your unwillingness to accept them? Get real!

'If the terms are right' - that is what the debate was supposed to be about: the particular system proposed to provide for parishes unwilling to accept the ministry of women bishops. The plan was that they could issue a letter of request for alternative provision to which 'respect' would be given under a code of conduct. But again, the outside world will not be interested in explanations about this, or why some found it wanting, or about the many alternative systems of 'protection' (some of them extraordinarily complex) that have been exhaustively considered and rejected in the last few years.

So what explanation will satisfy - for those who haven't already written off the church as irrelevant or worse? The focus in the media, in the world at large, has shifted back to the basic issues of equality and justice. How come, they say, that discrimination is still allowed in the church when it is not tolerated elsewhere in contemporary society - apart perhaps from a few golf clubs and gentlemen's clubs? Ironically, the Second Church Estates Commissioner, Tony Baldry MP, who speaks for the Church of England in Parliament (and does a good and difficult job), wore the tie of one of these clubs [the Garrick] when he answered questions in the urgent debate in Parliament. Because we are an established church, and claim to speak for the nation, Parliament does have a legitimate interest here; any church legislation has to be approved by Parliament. Some of you may have read the questions and answers from this debate which I circulated; they make interesting reading. MPs of all parties (some of them committed, sympathetic and well-informed Anglicans, some of them hostile to the church) are now questioning with renewed vigour the principles of establishment - if the CofE claims to be the church of the nation, should it not reflect the views of the nation (and indeed of the majority of churchgoers)? Why should we still have bishops in the House of Lords if they are all men? Should not the exemption from equality legislation be cancelled immediately (that's easier said than done, because it applies to all denominations and faiths)? The PM, and the Equalities Minister, have acknowledged that it is for the church to sort out its own problems, but they have also issued a prod - this cannot drag on for ever, and you must get on with this sooner rather than later.

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I was struck by the comments of Lucy Winkett, formerly of St Paul's Cathedral and now Rector of St James Piccadilly. Writing about the credibility of the church after this vote, she says *The fact that we look foolish in the eyes of society is for some an embarrassment [but] for others a badge of honour. Foolishness for Christ was something St Paul encouraged, and so some argue that unpopularity is an indication of authentic spirituality.* This is an important point: we should not underestimate the 'badge of honour' brigade, who take pride in standing against the worldly or secular standards of their day, who positively welcome ridicule as a vindication of their cause. Whether they are right to hold others to ransom is, of course, another matter.

Reinhold Niebuhr's classic book *Christ and Culture* (which I have spoken of before) suggests that there are several different models of the relationship between church and world (that's what he means by 'culture'). He identifies their roots in scripture, and describes the form they have taken over the centuries. One of these he calls 'Christ against culture', and St John's gospel and letters undergird it: for instance, with verses such as *If you belonged to this world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world. That is why the world hates you.* Written against a background of persecution, their challenge is to radical defiance of secular values for the sake of the gospel. But it can become a false model: Professor Leslie Houlden once wrote that in these scriptures, *love seems almost like a huddling together for warmth and safety in the face of the world.*

Down the ages this pattern of discipleship has achieved great things, as Christians have courageously held out for the radical values of the gospel by distancing themselves in various ways from the society in which they live. But it does not sit easily with a church like our own which wants to play a full part in the life of the nation, and sees its vocation as speaking up for those who are outsiders just as much as for its insiders (the only club, said William Temple, which exists for the benefit of those who are not its members). And that's particularly so when we seem to be promoting values which are less, rather than more, radical than those of the world around. Our national church has led the campaign against other forms of discrimination in the past (think of slavery, for instance, in which Christians took the lead - though I have to say that my research into some of our 18th century churchwardens shows that some of them owned slave ships). But this week the church seems to be giving the message that we have been overtaken by a world which learnt many of its values from us in the first place.

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Christ's kingdom is indeed based on the foolishness of the cross - on the risk of failure, on defying the principalities and powers, on a refusal to compromise with systems and practices which the world regards as wise. But on this particular issue there should be no conflict between church and world: for our starting point is that *in Christ there is neither male nor female, but all are one in him.* This is a message that our society - slowly, painfully - has learnt from us; and we need to show the world that this is what we still believe.

And now to him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.