



The Bishop of St Albans: Presidential Address
Diocesan Synod: 14 June 2008

Ping! (I gather you're supposed to say that these days)....Ping! an email comes in. It is headed "Counterfeit Communion and the Truth that sets free". It is about the Lambeth Conference and is sub-headed, "an urgent call to action". Of course, that's what every email says. Then it continues with a biblical text. Joshua 24:15 – "Choose this day whom you will serve".

You have probably got the drift already, but in case you haven't, here is another quotation from the same document: "The historic Anglican faith has demonstrated its transformative power in the Global South and this is where its centre now lies. We should be under no illusion; it is only through severing links with Canterbury and the present Anglican Communion to form a new global Communion that the Anglican faith will be preserved and free to flourish in loyalty to God's Word written as envisaged by the English Reformers." And with a final, peace-filled flourish it concludes: "Let us welcome the new wineskin of a new Communion, and truly global and truly Anglican Church. 'But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord' Joshua 24:15."

Well. It's a little ironic that a communiqué should claim that severing links, causing rupture and being separate should be thought to be the way to create a "truly global and truly Anglican Church". However, that is the claim being made.

I have little doubt that the closer we get to the Lambeth Conference more and more emails will flow in from people holding a wide variety of convictions.

There are some underlying questions, which I want to explore in this address: firstly, the use and abuse of scripture. I can understand why verses from the Book of Joshua are quoted in the email I received. It's good Henry V-type stuff, but there are some stories in Joshua which I find morally repellent. For example, the attack on the town of Ai in which Joshua and his troops slaughtered all the inhabitants, men, women and children. We might legitimately describe this as ethnic cleansing. The story, as a story of the origins of Israel, is a stirring one – but tell it from the perspective of the women or the children of Ai and it takes on a different hue. There's no need, at this point, to say more – but if you tear a biblical verse out of its historical, social, political and religious context you will do serious injustice to understanding. Furthermore, to claim, by implication, that somehow the situation in the Anglican Communion is exactly comparable to that described in a book which achieved its current form sometime around 400 BC, and which in any case refers to 'historical' events which took place many, many centuries earlier, raises more than a few questions.

Secondly, to suggest that the Anglican reformers (to whom like all of you I am extremely indebted and grateful) had an absolutely coherent and pure view of the role and purpose of Scripture is to ignore the part that real-politik played in the emergence of the Church of England in the 16th century. Let me make it plain, I rejoice in the Church of England, in its origins long before the 16th Century and in its developments since then, but I think that our understanding of the origins of the Church of England is enhanced if we take the national and international context of the time into account.

Thirdly, there is a moral question at the heart of what is being said, which is not only about the authority, the use and abuse of scripture but also about the nature of power in the Anglican Church or indeed, in any Church. The moral question for churches at all levels parish, deanery and diocese to struggle with is: 'What is the proper relationship between power (and how it is exercised) and the Christian faith?' And a further question: 'How should Christians handle profound disagreements?'

This forthcoming Lambeth Conference, like many of its predecessors, is dealing with disagreement: the previous Conference I attended in 1998 also involved some disagreement. Some of the Lambeth Conferences my predecessors attended were also marked by disagreement. Disagreement amongst and between Christians has existed not only since the Reformation but has existed since the Church began. Remember the story in Acts 15:36-41 in which Barnabas and Paul disagreed about who their travelling companion should be. Barnabas wanted John Mark to accompany them, Paul disagreed. "The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took John Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord". (And it's worth noting that he who writes the history, in this case, Luke, can be very subtle in suggesting who they believe to be in the right. There's no mention in Luke's account that the believers commended Barnabas and John Mark. How different the story of the early Church would have been if Barnabas had had as good a PR figure as Luke to write up his side of the story).

If sharp disagreement was there right at the beginning of the life of the early Church we need to acknowledge it – and not pretend that everything was then sweetness and light and if only we could follow early Church practice unity would flourish.

We have two options when disagreements break out. The first is to say as Paul and Barnabas did, 'This is such a serious matter, we must split up, and live with the consequences.' The second is to say: 'This is such a serious matter, we must do all we can to understand each other and try to achieve reconciliation'.

My own view is that Christ's love requires us always to work for healing, for reconciliation and for the creation of mutual respect and understanding. It is a hard and difficult road in which reconciliation should never be mistaken for appeasement. (Do you know the jibe used of Chamberlain during his many aeroplane trips to and from Germany before WWII: 'If at first you don't appease, fly, fly and fly again?'). What reconciliation requires on all sides is the abandonment of the will-to-power, humility, open-ness of heart and mind, intelligent and courteous discourse, and a recognition of the twist in human nature, in me and in the other person, which may make reconciliation unachievable this side of the grave. It is that combination of grace and realism which is so hard to achieve.

It is my hope and prayer, of course, that the Lambeth Conference may be so imbued with the gifts of God's love that the disagreements (which are profound), may become the soil out of which new flowers of truth and grace may grow.

We shall see. Meanwhile, please pray for our Archbishop, for all the bishops and their spouses who will be there – that new ways forward may be discovered which will ensure that the richness of our Christian faith may be used for the proclamation of Christ's healing and reconciling work in the world.

Addendum

And finally..... after I had written my Presidential Address a book was published which hit the headlines, "Moral, But No Compass", an exploratory (note the word) study 'enquiring into the Church of England's current social contribution and an assessment of its involvement in welfare reform, voluntary activity and public service delivery in pursuit of the common good'. (Pg 13).

The book hit the headlines because it seemed to suggest that the current Government whilst moral had no compass, no coherent sense of direction. But actually the critique is of both the Government and the Church. It makes very clear that there is no coherent understanding within the Civil Service or Government Agencies of the role the Church of England actually plays in society. It points out the profound lack of statistical data in the Government's own data bases about the contribution we already make and shows how, as a result, much policy-making is not grounded in reality.

It outlines the remarkable work carried out by Christians in volunteering capacities. In the East of England for instance, 49,000 volunteers support over 5,000 social and community projects. It also points out in an eye-catching statistic that Anglican cathedrals in England provide directly and indirectly for 5,450 full-time equivalent jobs, roughly the number of people employed by Ryanair and twice the number of people employed by Avon Cosmetics, one of the top three beauty brands in the UK.

What the book also makes clear is that there is a serious mis-match between how the Churches perceive themselves – and how they are perceived by government; a serious lack of knowledge about what the Church of England does, and a serious lack of knowledge within the Church of England about the structures and challenges of government.

This is a timely, stimulating and very important document which I hope will be taken up by diocesan committees and at a local level in deaneries and parishes. Conversations between the Church and civil society need to take place so that real understanding may grow and our society improve. But this will, inevitably, involve resourcing not least for the kind of careful, evidence-based analysis which needs to happen if all that we already do as a diocese is to be noticed and, more importantly, if we are to make that contribution to society which it is our duty as Christians to do.

I was delighted to see that the book mentions the work of Ascend, South Oxhey, St Mark's, Bedford and St Albans Abbey and contains an important quotation from the Revd Canon Richard Wheeler.

Please read this book – and please may it provide a major platform for developing our work in the diocese in the future.

