

SERMON AT THE 'VISION GLORIOUS' CELEBRATION
Wakefield Cathedral, 24 November 2013
by Bishop Tony Robinson, Bishop of Pontefract

A bishop told me the other day apart from the ordination of women issue we are as catholic as each other. I didn't realise it was something you could pick and choose.

Talk to anyone of a certain age and they will all agree on one thing: "things are not what they used to be. We speak of the good old days, the past is seen as a golden age, a time of innocence, of the simple things of life, a time of health and strength, a time free of cares and worries.

Whether or not the good old days really were good and whether the present really is so bad is an interesting place of debate and discussion for us today.

This year is a 180th anniversary of John Keble's Assize Sermon, preached in Oxford on 14 July 1833, which has been reckoned was the catalyst which sparked the Oxford Movement. The modern reader of the sermon might well be surprised that so great an influence was ascribed to it. It denounced as national apostasy pending legislation of the British Parliament to reduce the number of bishoprics in the Church of Ireland by a process of amalgamation. It is very similar to what is being proposed here in West Yorkshire 180 years later! But for John Keble a great principle was at stake.

Keble raised the question of the nature of the church and its authority; and that led to the renewal of the sense of the apostolicity and catholicity of the Church of England.

The effect of the Oxford Movement on the Church of England and ultimately on the emerging Anglican Communion was profound. An historian of the Church of England in the twentieth century, put it this way:

"I believe the holy catholic church. In 1800 hardly any Anglicans perceived the significance or rejoiced in the glory of this claim. In 1900 the catholicity of the Church of England was eagerly asserted by all instructed church people".

He may be right in his comparison of 1800 and 1900. But what of 2013? Is there still such clarity on the catholic nature of our church?

When we confess our faith we affirm our belief in "the holy catholic Church" in the Apostles' Creed, or in "one holy catholic and apostolic Church" in the Nicene Creed. The Declarations of the Church of England state it uncompromisingly:

The Church of England is part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation. of Christ,

The nature of this church as an authentic embodiment of the Catholic Church of the ages is stated to be fundamental. By contrast, our formularies nowhere describe this church as protestant or reformed.

That is not to say that there is no sense in which the words protestant and reformed have a place in our understanding of this church. The Church of England underwent great reformation in the 16th Century, and this has had a substantial effect on the character of Anglicanism. Indeed we are not ashamed to say that the church constantly needs to be reformed. There is also a real sense in which Anglicanism is protestant. We protest for certain great truths which were neglected and downplayed in the mediaeval church, and we protest against certain errors and abuses which had crept into the western church. But the Anglican Church is basically and inherently catholic. It did not begin at the Reformation, and those who interpret the language of our liturgy and our formularies as if they stood alone and were not grounded on centuries of catholic faith and tradition profoundly fail to understand the history and character of the Anglican Church.

In speaking of the Anglican Church as being inherently catholic, I use the word "catholic" in its broad original meaning. Catholic means whole, integral, complete: its opposite is partial, unbalanced, sectarian". .

To be truly catholic means taking seriously the power of the Holy Spirit, so enthusiastically testified to by evangelicals and charismatics; it means conserving the treasures of the past; it means we must be open to fresh initiatives for the future; it means we have a social gospel; it means we are alert to the real questions being asked by our contemporaries; it most importantly calls us to develop our own our personal holiness.

General Synod has this week approved the latest proposal for the ordination of women as bishops. We can talk more about this after the service. The crumbs that have finally fallen from the rich man's table are something with which we have to try to flourish. The question for us now is: are we willing to have a go and maintain a vibrant catholic traditionalist wing which continues to add something to the life of our Church?

The Society will be our way of coming together, uniting together, to work together in new ways for our future. It will require us not to look back at the good old days but to look to days yet to come where we as catholic Anglicans have created an ecclesial body which allows us to flourish.

In our Gospel reading today as the passion gets under way, Jesus has to witness to his own truth. He remains stubborn in his trust of the Father, in spite of the catcalls of his accusers and the silence of his absent friends. He may wonder where all the witnesses to truth have gone and why they are so few in number when the authorities come out in force. He may wonder why you end up being pushed around so much for the sake of the kingdom. He may have his own questions about the worth of it all. He may doubt if the pain will ever go away.

To crown it all, Pilate ensures that Jesus has his title above his cross: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews". Is that comic relief? Is that protest? Is that the nearest Pilate will ever get to witnessing to the truth? Who knows?

What we do know is that Jesus' unfailing witness to the truth marks his true kingship. As his subjects, we will be judged on how we have witnessed to his truth, his love, his way. For a place in his kingdom we will be questioned on our own attitudes and behaviour. We don't have to wait for the last judgement to find out the questions we will be asked. When it comes to places in his kingdom, the interviews are already taking place. Here and now.

What John Keble reminded his hearers, and what the Oxford Movement took up, was the integral place of the Anglican Church in the great continuous stream of catholic Christianity. Because the church is composed of fallible human members it is constantly in need of reformation and renewal; but because it is the divine society indwelt by the Holy Spirit, the gates of hell will not prevail against it. That was Jesus' promise. His invitation to us is to be agents in the fulfilment of that promise. I believe in the future of Anglo-Catholicism but it needs us to reform and renew ourselves. May we all commit ourselves to that future.