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Diocese of California: Diocesan Convention
Sermon at Eucharist, Grace Cathedral
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2 Cor 5:16-21
John 17:20-26

Brothers and sisters in Christ, it is a great joy for me to be with you today. Thank you for your invitation.

Our New Testament lesson has been very dear to me throughout my life – a sort of theme tune that has run through my ministry over the years. It is a song of new beginnings and of reconciliation, both of which are at the heart of God's glorious redemptive salvation for his people and his world.

Of course, it is not surprising that the message of reconciliation speaks powerfully to South Africans.

It was what we dreamed of in the terrible struggle years.

It was what we dared hope for when the possibility of a peaceful transformation to democracy opened up before us.

It is what we strive for now, in overcoming the legacy of deep divisions from the past, with which we are still faced.

The message of reconciliation is also a powerful one for South African Anglicans, given our turbulent history – and I shall return to this in a moment – because the lessons that we have had to learn, are lessons that I believe the Anglican Communion needs to grapple with today.

One of the greatest sadnesses of current disagreements within the Communion is the way the debate, instead of focussing on possibilities of reconciliation, has become so polarised into extreme "either/or" positions. To follow either extreme is to put at risk the great riches of our Anglican heritage, through which the Lord has blessed us so greatly over the centuries.

We must not lose this inheritance, if we are serious about being faithful to the Lord, as he has been faithful to us.

At the heart of Anglicanism is not one single way of being Christian. Rather, within a broad and fertile territory, there is a breadth of legitimate expressions of faith, which hold to that centre who is Jesus Christ.

I called these "The Heartlands of Anglicanism" in a paper I published last year in response to the Archbishop of Canterbury's profound reflection, "The Challenge and Hope of Being an Anglican Today."

In this he depicted our distinctive Anglican heritage as having the three strands:

First, "a reformed commitment to the absolute priority of the Bible for deciding doctrine,"
Second, "a catholic loyalty to the sacraments and the threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons," and
Third, "a habit of cultural sensitivity and intellectual flexibility that does not seek to close down unexpected questions too quickly."

At its best, our living faith draws on the strengths of all three of these threads -- reformed, catholic and intelligently culturally sensitive. And all three weave through each of the Anglican standards of Scripture, Tradition and Reason.

Through their creative interplay we can grow in a deep and richly textured, maturing, faith. In dynamic dialogue together, these strands constantly draw us toward the centre – one baptism, one Church, one faith, and, most of all, one Lord "in whom all things hold together" (Cor 1:17); the Lord who, in today's gospel reading, prayed "that they all might be one" (Jn 17:21).

Because we have Jesus at the centre of our lives and faith, Anglicans have found through the ages that we can afford to live with a degree of messiness, ambiguity and anomaly at the edges.

But this does not mean "anything goes." By no means!

We are all permanently under the three-fold testing and purifying scrutiny of the refining fire of God's holiness (Zech 13:9), of the two-edged sword of Scripture (Heb 4:12), of minds transformed by the renewing Spirit (Rom 12:2).

It is on this basis we dare to engage with the complexities of contemporary life around us.

God is God of everything, and we need to have the spiritual maturity, and the depth and breadth of faith, to know how to listen to what he has to say about everything from global security and biotechnology to poverty and development.

We need to be able to engage profoundly, and often critically, with every aspect of human behaviour.

Sometimes we speak of the need to "baptize culture."

This is no cursory wipe with a damp cloth to produce a superficial religious veneer.

Baptism is the radical transformation that comes through burial with Christ and being raised with him to new life. Every culture must die to the priorities, the loyalties, the idols, of this world; and find new, authentic, life-giving, contemporary expression -- transfigured under the Lordship of Jesus, Saviour and Redeemer, who calls us to walk in holiness of life.

This is God's call to all of us, and to every area of our lives – it is not just about sexuality and the morality of our sexual behaviour.

It is the life of obedience and self-discipline, and often costly self-denial, for, as Paul reminds the Corinthian church, even where "all things are lawful," it may well be that "not all things are beneficial" (1 Cor 10:23).

All of us would do well to remember this, as we grapple with our diversity -- believing it to be a gift of God's creative abundance.

As individuals, congregations, Dioceses, Provinces, and as a global Communion, we grow best when we have that level of complimentary difference which can indeed "provoke one another to love and to good deeds" (Heb 10:24).

This is what I hope for, and argue for, within the Anglican Communion.

I salute the Episcopal Church for the gracious response made by the House of Bishops last month. This has not been an easy road for any of us -- but I hope that we can now go forward together.

It is my fervent prayer and hope that in the fullness of time the Church as a whole will find an amicable solution regarding the pastoral needs of our lesbian and gay sisters and brothers, just as we did in the case of women in the ordained ministry.

Certainly it is the view of my own House of Bishops that we should all continue to hold together as we work through our differences, as we seek to respond to the complex ethical and moral issues that arise from time to time.

We do not say this lightly.

Southern Africa is one of the most diverse Provinces of the Communion.

As well as South Africa, we cover Angola, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, St. Helena and Tristan da Cunha. We have 13 official languages, and encompass all races and cultures of our region.

We include every form of church tradition from the lowest to the highest!

We have also had our share of disagreements.

We had severe differences over how to respond to apartheid – whether on the question of sanctions, or the armed struggle, or chaplains serving with the South African army occupying Angola. But we held together.

And we still hold together, despite a range of views on the ministry of women and on human sexuality.

We also live with the fall-out of Anglican differences rooted in the nineteenth century. Separation has not made problems 'go away' but has left a lasting, and often little less difficult, legacy.

For example, in 1866, Bishop Colenso of Natal was excommunicated after lengthy disagreement with Bishop Gray of Cape Town across a wide range of issues, some of which would still be regarded as controversial. (Indeed, the first Lambeth conference was convened largely as a result of this dispute.)

However, in 1985 we recognised and affirmed Colenso's "courageous leadership...in the areas of pioneering biblical scholarship, cross-cultural mission and the pursuit of social justice." We are still exploring how we can appropriately acknowledge the fruits of his ministry in our Province, almost 150 years later. Excommunication solved very little.

There are other anomalies of Anglican history with which we live today, particularly with the Church of England in South Africa, and the Ethiopian Episcopal Church.

Separation brings its own complications, which re-echo down subsequent centuries. These "cousin" relationships have roots over a century old, and the anomalies they bring are likely to remain with us for the foreseeable future.

So the clear answer of my Province is that "choosing to walk apart" solves very little, in either short or long term. It is far, far, better to hold to the heart of Anglicanism and work through our differences together.

As our Synod of Bishops said,

We know from experience that unity is a divine gift but requires constant effort to be realised; a journey that requires tolerance and grace so that no-one should be hurt and all should feel that they belong. Our own journey continues to remind us of the need for a generosity of spirit and the respect for diversity.

...As Bishops, we remain convinced that within the Anglican Communion what unites us far outweighs what divides us.

...We urge the Anglican Communion to choose to remain united in accordance with the will of the Triune God whom we seek to serve.

...We urge every part of the Anglican Communion to recognise, in one another, our common sanctification in Christ and to seek steps that, in time, will lead to reconciliation and the unity and peace that Christ wills for his Church.

As we go forward, the means by which we engage in deliberations and pursue our solutions must also accord with our Anglican heritage.

Therefore we must uphold the Anglican habits of the God-given, God-graced virtues of trust, tolerance and charity, accepting that those with whom we disagree are acting in good faith.

Furthermore, we must follow the due processes of our structures.

We must honour our inheritance as both episcopally led and synodically governed. Clergy and laity, the whole people of God, must be included in wide debate, alongside the deliberations of the Primates, and the discussions of Bishops at Lambeth. We are not a church constituted in its bishops alone -- and certainly not in its Primates alone.

I have deep reservations about the prominence given to the Primates, rather than the Anglican Consultative Council, in the draft Anglican Covenant. Indeed, I remain to be convinced that a relationship founded on grace and the unity in Christ that is his gift, can be regulated in this way at all.

Furthermore, the present draft seems to be crafted as a mechanism for exclusion. This is wholly contrary to the very nature of God our Father, whose desire is always to seek reconciliation; and the very nature of Jesus Christ, who came not to condemn but to save; and the very nature of the Holy Spirit, the manifestation of whom is given to each of us for the common good, the life in common which Christians are called to share.

In upholding the Anglican way, we must also respect the autonomy of Provinces to order their own lives through their own Synodical processes.

Furthermore, no-one can claim to be authentically Anglican while ignoring the polity of the Church since earliest times, by which Bishops' authority is recognised within their own dioceses, without the interference of other Bishops, however much they may disagree.

To support this, we need a better engagement with Anglican Tradition.

This requires a fresh understanding of what tradition means. It is not dry forensic history, but holy remembering of God's abiding with his people, through the centuries.

It is to recognise God at work in our church in our past, and to know ourselves in living continuity with his faithful people in every age. To remember is to take our place within God's wonderful story of reconciliation and redemption.

Our task is to abide in Jesus Christ – to be in him, and be one in him, as he and his Father are one, as the gospel reading said.

I am sure that through the current turbulence we shall emerge, refined by fire, and renewed for ministry and mission with a fresh zeal.

Be faithful, hold fast to Jesus Christ, and wait attentively on him in persistent prayer, for, as the prophet Isaiah assures us,

"Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint" (Is 40:31).

In conclusion, my message to you today is this: be of good heart -- this is God's Church -- he has preserved it through the turmoil of the past. The Lord who prayed for us to be united in each other as we are united in him, will preserve it for us now!

Amen.
