

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

31/1/16

“Is the church bigger than Jesus?”

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.

Prior to my ordination as Deacon in the Church of God and during my year as an ordinand at Langa, the Dean of Studies required me to attend and participate in a series of courses on Anglican Studies. I was very lucky to be under the guidance of the Revd Dr Sarah Rowland Jones, who today is a very senior cleric in the Anglican Church of Wales. Part of this awareness programme was looking at the concept of the worldwide Anglican Communion. At this stage of my training I did not yet have a full understanding of what the Anglican Communion was or how it worked. Sarah spent some time explaining to Michael Bester and I how the Anglican Communion is structured and what its strengths and weaknesses are.

In all honesty, during the years of my curacy, the whole concept of the Anglican Communion sort of slipped my mind as I concentrated on learning the liturgy and grasping the intricacies of being an Anglican Priest...

Until recently.

You may be aware that once again the Anglican Church has been in the international news with regards to certain issues that have attracted the attention of both those who support and criticise the church. The Anglican Communion has been brought into sharp focus due to how a certain issue has been handled.

It has been on my heart for a while to have a look at this furore, but in order to do this, we first need to have a basic understanding of what exactly the Anglican Communion is, how it works, what its powers are and what influence it has.

I then wish to have a specific look at the debate that the Anglican Communion has responded to.

Lastly, I wish to discuss the whole idea of how we as Anglican Christians should respond to both the Anglican Communion and the specific issue that has been raised. What is the message that Jesus left us with regards to this? Has the worldwide church, in their attempt to govern and discipline Christians become larger than Jesus, or does Jesus remain bigger than the church?

These are some of the questions I wish to have a look at today.

Firstly, I need to ask you to keep an open mind as I discuss these contentious issues. They are complicated and to many people, provoke emotional responses. My only aim this morning is to raise an awareness of the church's struggle, not to provide slick and perfect answers.

So, what is the Anglican Communion and how does it work?

The 1930 Lambeth Conference described the Anglican Communion as "fellowship, within the one holy catholic and apostolic church, of those duly constituted dioceses, provinces or regional churches in communion with the see of Canterbury."

This very same communion comprises of 85 million people in over 165 countries.

The Anglicans also call themselves Episcopalians in some countries, for example, the USA.

Anglicans and Episcopalians the world over share aspects of their history, tradition and ways of worshipping, but no two churches are exactly alike even within a diocese, let alone a province or between countries. This unity in diversity is one of the things that make the Anglican Communion so special and such a rich ground from which to change the world.

Today the Anglican Communion is 38 autonomous national and regional Churches plus six Extra Provincial Churches and dioceses; all of which are in Communion- in a reciprocal relationship- with the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is the Communion's spiritual head.

One of the strengths of the Anglican Communion has been that co-operation continues in spite of significant disagreements on various issues.

Now here is the interesting factor to consider: The Archbishop of Canterbury has precedence or honour over the bishops of the Anglican Communion, however, he does NOT exercise direct authority in the provinces outside England, but instead acts as a focus of unity.

So, why the recent furore regarding the Anglican Communion?

Well, it's complicated.

Over this past month, there was a meeting called by the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby in order to discuss many issues, including gay rights and same-sex marriage.

This is a contentious issue for many.

For many Anglicans, the issue culminated when the Episcopal Church in the US consecrated the openly gay (and non-celibate) priest Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire in 2003.

The more liberal provinces around the world are open to changing Church doctrine on marriage in order to allow for same-sex unions. However, there are many countries and specific churches within the Communion who are bitterly opposed to changing the doctrine in order to allow same-sex marriages. This has resulted in many LGBT's or Lesbian, Bi-sexual, Gay and transgender Christians feeling marginalised and excluded.

This issue often boils down to how the Bible is interpreted and contextualised. Many church leaders within the Anglican Communion choose to adopt a conservative fundamentalist approach whereby biblical text is accepted without question or applying the historico-critical method. The result is an unwavering dedication to the concept that marriage can only ever take place between a male and a female.

More liberal theologians and church leaders are prepared to allow church doctrine to evolve in order to be more inclusive of those Christians who find themselves not following the more traditional social mores of society.

Many people feel extremely strongly about this issue.

It is personal.

It is intimate.

It is human.

So, how did the primate meeting turn out?

Good question.

The primates voted overwhelmingly to adopt a statement which stressed their unanimous desire to walk together, thus preserving the integrity of the Anglican Communion.

However, the other decision that was also taken was to suspend the Episcopal Church for their failure to adhere to the traditional doctrine of the Anglican Church regarding marriage. Thus the Episcopal Church has now been suspended for a period of three years. The Episcopal Church may not represent the Anglican Communion for a period of three years on matters such as doctrine or polity.

Sadly, as a result of this decision, many LBGTs around the world felt excluded and offended.

So what are my thoughts?

Firstly, while I honour and respect the primates decision to focus on communion at all costs, when does the cost become too great? At what point is it no longer worth it? There has been a call by some church leaders to disband the traditional Anglican Communion in favour of a more loosely structured group that will allow more movement and evolution of doctrine.

Secondly, I remain concerned about the message going out to those who find their sexuality in contrast to what is accepted in mainline traditional society. Whilst I understand and appreciate that this matter is incredibly complicated and sensitive, should the Gospel ever be exclusive? I know that there are people in this very parish this morning who are both open to and against same-sex marriage. In spite of our personal opinions and beliefs on the matter, what should our response be to others who are different to us?

Thirdly, the Gospel tells us this morning that even Jesus suffered rejection. Yet, the Gospel instructs us to be accepting and loving of others around us. Jesus set the example for us by loving the tax collector, the prostitute, the Roman soldier, the lepers and even the criminals who died on the crosses next to Him. No-one ever said being a Christian would be easy. It is not. It is challenging. It is thought provoking. It is hard.

Fourthly, what should our responses be as active, thoughtful and sensitive Christians participating in the real world around us? Exactly that. We should strive as Christians to continue to be active, thoughtful and sensitive. I do believe that it is also our duty as Christians to be as inclusive as possible, in spite of the fact that there may be Christians around us who do not share the same view as us, including views on sexuality. Father Derek and I chose to disagree on the liturgical use of the Prayer of Humble Access, yet we continued to love each other and work as a team. We chose to rise above our disagreement for the glory of Christ. The Gospel won. This, I believe, is exactly what we need to do as Christians with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who find themselves marginalised because of their sexuality. Jesus meant for the Gospel to be inclusive, not exclusive. It is our duty and obligation to ensure that we continue this tradition.

Lastly, we need to continue to pray for those in church leadership who struggle with these contentious issues. Our church leaders are responsible to continue correct and authoritative exegesis and hermeneutics of the Bible in such a way that the Word of God remains real and relevant to a changing society. This is no easy task. There will always be criticism and disagreement. There will always be hurt and pain. Our job is to lift our leaders up in prayer so that the hurt can be minimalised and the Holy Spirit maximised in all that they do.

The Cross reaches out to everyone, poor and rich, black and white, male and female, gay and straight. Be that person reaching out, in spite of your personal misgivings and thoughts on these issues. Jesus preached love for all. Be that love in the real world, because if you and I fail to do this, we are failing both the Gospel and Jesus. Jesus is bigger than the church, always, remember that.

Do you have a personal intuitive response to the Anglican Communion and the issues it faces?

May God bless you in this week ahead as you strive to reach out to others who are perhaps different to you.

Amen.