

# **Right Direction - Wrong Turn:**

## **Reflections on Archbishop's Pentecost Letter.**

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The Archbishop's Pentecost letter to the Anglican Communion has grabbed the headlines for its call for the Episcopal Church to step down from 2 committees of the Anglican Communion, following the consecration of the Communion's first openly lesbian Bishop, Mary Glasspool,

But the bulk of Rowan Williams letter builds a good theological argument for continuing dialogue in the search for mutual understanding, while recognising our diversity. The following are direct quotes from his letter, showing a very different approach to the exclusion he has called for.

He begins by recognising that no one group of Christians have a monopoly on the truth of the Christian Gospel. The fullness of the Gospel belongs to God and God alone and we respond to Him within the story and culture of our lives and that of our society.

- *"The Gospel is not the property of any one group, any one culture or history, but is what God intends for the salvation of all who will listen and respond."*

He then goes on to recognise the diversity of Christians and the Church as we seek to follow Christ, unified not by our understanding of doctrine, but by our baptism and faith in Christ

- *"We know, in the Spirit, that we who are baptised into Jesus Christ share one life; so that all the diversity of gifting and service in the Church can be seen as the work of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12.4).*
- *"When the Church is living by the Spirit, what the world will see is a community of people who joyfully and gratefully hear the prayer of Jesus being offered in each other's words and lives, and are able to recognise the one Christ working through human diversity."*

This response to Christ in our different cultures and societies will inevitably result in different priorities and expressions in the way in which seek to make Christ known. These differing perspectives can be a cause of friction between Christians

- *"We are constantly reminded that the priorities of mission are experienced differently in different places, and that trying to communicate the Gospel in the diverse tongues of human beings can itself lead to misunderstandings and failures of communication between Christians"*

But the challenges that this brings, and even our failure to understand each other sufficiently, do not absolve us of God's call for us to continue to work towards the goal of mutual understanding, respect, and thankfulness.

- *"We have not, in other words, found a way of shaping our consciences and convictions as a worldwide body... yet we are called to seek for mutual harmony and common purpose, and not to lose heart. If the truth of Christ is indeed ultimately one as we all believe, there should be a path of mutual respect and thankfulness that will hold us in union and help us grow in that truth."*

Finally, the Archbishop remind us that in times of change (such as now) we need to work all the harder in our conversation and fellowship

- *"A time of transition, by definition, does not allow quick solutions to such questions, and it is a time when, ideally, we need more than ever to stay in conversation. As I have said many times before, whatever happens to our structures, we still need to preserve both working relationships and places for exchange and discussion."*

All of the above speak profoundly to the situation in which the Anglican Communion finds itself.

Anglican Christians in California, (and elsewhere) seeking to understand the Gospel at work in their lives, and making Christ known in their context and culture have come to a point where they have discerned the will of God in consecrating Mary Glasspool. Anglican Christians in Canada (and elsewhere) feel that God has called them to make provision for the blessing of same-sex partnerships. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Christians everywhere are experiencing the love, grace and blessing of God in exactly the same way as their heterosexual brothers and sisters in Christ, and want to be fully included in the life of God's Church, just as God includes them fully in the life of His Kingdom.

This is, of course deeply disturbing to Anglican Christians in other cultures where even the thought of homosexuality can produce an almost physical revulsion. This can be true in Africa, and indeed in conservative homes in America and elsewhere, but the gospel calls us to continue to open to one another in love.

When it comes to the practical outworking of this, however the Archbishop then breaks totally with this argument and calls for members of TEC and Canada to step down from a number of the Communion's official bodies, for which he offers no theological justification - only pragmatism.

- *There are still things being done that the representative bodies of the Communion have repeatedly pleaded should not be done ...*
- *I am therefore proposing that, while these tensions remain unresolved, members of such provinces – provinces that have formally, through their Synod or House of Bishops, adopted policies that breach any of the moratoria ...should not be participants in the ecumenical dialogues in which the Communion is formally engaged.*

Leaving aside the fact that the "things being done" should also include the continuing statements made by some conservative Anglicans which de-humanise and scapegoat homosexuals, this proposal comes as a stark contrast to the argument he has just developed, and is not theologically justified in any way. The intention seems simply to appease the voices of objection - to show that something has been done in response to Mary Glasspool's consecration.

This internal contradiction is further highlighted by his final paragraph referring back to the Pentecost theme.

- *We are praying for a new Pentecost for our Communion. That means above all a vast deepening of our capacity to receive the gift of being adopted sons and daughters of the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ. It means a deepened capacity to speak of Jesus Christ in the language of our context so that we are heard and the Gospel is made compelling and credible. And it also means a deepened capacity to love and nourish each other within Christ's Body – especially to love and nourish, as well as to challenge, those whom Christ has given us as neighbours with whom we are in deep and painful dispute.*

The key part of this last paragraph encourage us to deepen our capacity to recognise the gift we receive from God in being adopted sons and daughters of God - and therefore recognising each other - gay, straight, African, American, conservative or progressive - as brothers and sisters in Christ

It also encourages us to speak the Gospel in the language of our own context - which he has already acknowledged is very different in different places.

And finally it encourages us to love & nourish, as well as challenge each other - which is always harder to do when people are asked not to come!

It is not at all clear what practical effect the exclusion will have in the workings of the Communion, except to further erode the part which the Episcopal Church in the USA and in Canada is allowed to play in Communion discussions. But it does seek to marginalise a part of the Anglican Communion which has a proven track record of being a prophetic voice of inclusion in the Anglican Church - the first to ordain women to the priesthood, the first to have women Bishops, and more recently the first to have openly gay and lesbian Bishops. Such exclusion will leave us all the poorer as a worldwide church if the erosion is allowed to continue.

The Archbishop is right in his letter when he reminds us of the need to walk together in the way of Christ from our differing cultures and contexts. He is right in saying we need to deepen our capacity to love, nourish and challenge each other in our discipleship of Christ. He is right in reminding us that this path is not an easy one. His letter gives us the right direction.

So it is such a pity that the only practical outworking of the letter is so at odds with what he has written.

Right direction - wrong turn.

### ***Benny Hazlehurst - Accepting Evangelicals***

You can read the Archbishop's Letter in Full at <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org>

You can also read a Pastoral Letter issued in response by the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the USA at <http://www.episcopalchurch.org>