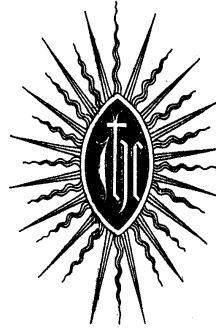


# THE TRADITIONAL ANGLICAN CHURCH

## PROVISIONAL PARISH OF ST. LUKE, AMPHILL

Rev'd Michael Gray 15 Chesterfield Road. Cambridge CB4 1LN (01223) 426278



### A course of sermons on the Church

*I believe **one holy catholic and apostolic church**" (creed).*

The issue of the TAC approach to Rome requires us to confront what we mean by this clause of the creed, so I propose a short course of sermons. However, the first point comes from last Sunday's epistle; if you do not love your brother, whom you have seen, how can you love God? This is meant as much of your brother in the church as of natural brothers. There never was an "invisible" church. The underlying Greek is a good secular word meaning "assembly" - what happens when the whole citizen population of a state *meets together as an organised body*. The underlying Hebrew has the same implication, except that the assembly is called by God and meets under his authority. This is a highly visible process and so are the failings to love the brother within it!

So when we speak of one church, it is found (at least) when we meet together, as now; yet also in much larger meetings together (even synods!) which have to be representative, and so right up to assemblies of the whole church, such as were the Ecumenical Councils in the past, to whose decisions we are bound.

One church does not mean one bureaucracy, or the absolute necessity of one earthly visible head (which may or may not be suggested in Matthew 16.18 – the early church was not sure about it). What it does mean is that all the inevitably physically separate groups of Christians have a clear duty to think and to act together. So in the early church, when each congregation had its own bishop, though the congregation chose that bishop, it was for neighbouring bishops to agree that choice and consecrate the candidate, or to require a fresh choice. Bishops were at pains to consult each other, lest they fall into false teaching or unwise practical decisions. Ordinary lay people when they travelled brought with them letters from their bishop confirming their Christian status.

Maybe this sounds rather humdrum, not very exciting, but it worked well. In practice, some churches either because of outstanding bishops or demonstrable theological knowledge came to be trusted as sources of advice and correction. The practical position of the Pope and the skills maintained in the Vatican (as opposed to theories of infallibility which seem not to lead anywhere) owes more to this experience than to the (alleged) promise to St. Peter.

Unity is a practical matter, not fine words but routine, humble, loving deeds. Its basis is in God's unity, which is to be worked out in our own (see John 17.21).

A particular mistake (made by Henry VIII and various protestant rulers, and also more recently in some Orthodox jurisdictions) is to try to identify church and nation. At worst, this produces the church as nationalised industry, serving man not God, or the church as legitimising (and expressing) myths of ethnicity. God's church from its very beginning at Whitsun has ideally embraced "every nation under heaven" in one body, and has not regarded national boundaries as significant. This is not to say that God has no interest in nations; merely that he does not treat them as permanent entities and does not call on us to reflect them in our life as the Church of God. It is probably a blessing that "established" national churches have almost disappeared from the world – they survive only in England and Scandinavia, and most of the Anglican bodies have never been in this unhappy situation.

At one level, the smallest church is complete (at least when it meets under its bishop). So is the smallest group of congregations. But no church, no group of congregations, nor even a large body such as Anglicanism or Orthodoxy, should imagine itself to be self-sufficient. That is a sin against the brethren. I believe that sin was committed in this country under Henry VIII and renewed under Elisabeth I. Henry did not allege the need for reformation as his pretext, merely a right to isolation. By the time of Elisabeth there was more belief that reform was needed, though little was achieved. It can fairly be argued that, by fits and starts, Anglicanism (as it slowly developed) recognised its duty to be one with the rest of God's church. Serious efforts at negotiations with Rome were begun, but then negated by a renewed isolationism, a belief that individual Anglican jurisdictions could decide important matters for themselves without reference to the wider church. That is essentially the mess which the Archbishop of Canterbury faces at the Lambeth conference this summer.

We believe that it is our duty to “love one another as he gave us commandment” and so seek one church, a duty which has been acknowledged in our foundation documents. There are all sorts of human reasons why the approach to Rome may fail; but better fail doing our duty to God than evade that duty.

*Preached Trinity II; the Epistle 1 John 3.13-24 is relevant.*

*I believe one **holy catholic and apostolic church**” (creed).*

We may find the claim that the church is “holy” arrogant. Indeed, some people in the late medieval church were embarrassed by it and cut the word out. This is a rather shallow response, but Cranmer (probably through sheer laziness) did not check his sources and perpetuated the error in the prayer book. We have gone back to the original text of the creed, which surprised nobody when it was first written, for “holy church” was a normal content of the baptismal creeds (and so was naturally included in what we know as the “Apostles' Creed”).

The confusion is thinking that “holy” means that the church and so we are ourselves “morally perfect”, or at least that a high moral performance is a necessary condition for holiness. But it is wrong to reduce holiness to decent behaviour. Certainly church is a place where we learn how to be good *and receive God's help to do it* – but it is a place for sinners, not for Pharisees. There are limits – church is not a place for those who have given up the struggle to be good, or who are determined to persist in an understanding of what God requires of us which is contrary to the experience of the Church throughout the ages, as guided by the Holy Spirit. But *church is not confined to the perfect*. The Traditional Anglican Communion does not claim perfection, merely the avoidance of some gross errors. “In the visible church, the evil is ever mingled with the good” as Article 26 (of the 39 Articles) says.

The Hebrew word which we translate as “holy” has the basic meaning of “separate”. So in speaking of holy church we assert that God has separated out a people for himself (the church inherits that status which God gave to the chosen people Israel) and has given to that people something of his own attributes. “Ye shall therefore be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11.45). Holiness is not something we achieve for ourselves; it is what God gives.

That is why the New Testament frequently talks of us, the people of God, as “saints”. This is not a small special group – it is us who are the “holy ones” (the plural is important). There is only one word in Greek or Hebrew to cover what we in English render by the different words “holy” and “saint”. I had better add that the “sacred ministry” (a term which I do not much like!) is not “holier than thou”; we are all holy *together*, by God's gift, though we have different tasks in the one church.

As I have already indicated, we do not claim to be holy by our own efforts, but because we are made holy, which is the work of the Holy Spirit. Not as if we have control over God – that only has to be said to be seen to be absurd and wicked, magic rather than religion. We do not control God, but he is faithful to his own promises, so it is right that we should expect the Spirit to assist us. You might with advantage study Romans 8 on this point. Any church of God, however small, however weak, is a church within which the Spirit is at work.

In that chapter, we find the Spirit most obviously at work in the church assembled for prayer, making the cry Abba (which may well be the opening of the “Our Father”). And that brings us to the great Sacraments, Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. These are fundamental to the existence of Holy Church, because they are, according to the New Testament, instituted by Christ himself. Thank God, almost all Christian bodies celebrate baptism correctly, and this is still true (I think) of all Anglican bodies. The issue of the validity of Anglican orders, which will have to be resolved somehow in our discussions with Rome, was for both sides in the 19<sup>th</sup> century dispute a question whether the Communion office in the prayer book as it was between 1552 and 1662 was a proper discharge of our duty to “do this in remembrance of me” or merely a verbal reminder to ourselves. For if it could be clearly established that there was no proper Holy Communion in that period, then there was no proper Church (or ministry) either. If so, we have to explain how Anglicanism recovered itself. I do not propose to solve the question now, though the radical changes made in the 1662 prayer book are part of the story. We are here because we believe that, by whatever strange paths, Anglicanism either always was or at least had become (until recent developments in various places both in the form of the Communion and in the ministry) part of Holy Church discharging that duty of holy worship.

So then we rightly call the church holy (in each congregation and taken together) because that is the character which God gives to it, and indeed to us as its members. This is not a matter for boasting, nor for a false sense of security. But of course we try in our worship and our lives to express that character.

*Preached Trinity IV (the readings are not relevant)*

*I believe one holy catholic and apostolic church” (creed).*

“Catholic” does not mean Roman Catholic. All the ancient jurisdictions within the Church rightly call themselves “catholic”. This is not a theological term; it is not in scripture. It is a very ordinary word, meaning “universal” or “general”. As such, it is first applied to the Christian hope, because the good news of the resurrection and of our salvation is for everybody. But the practical implementation of that hope is in the Church, so right at the start of the second century (before some of the New Testament books were written, if you were to believe liberal scholarship) Bishop Ignatius of Antioch writes “the Catholic Church is to found wherever Christ Jesus is”. We do well, I think, to note that it is that way round – the Church cannot have a monopoly in God!

So when we talk of the Catholic church we talk of a universal (and inherently missionary) body. Hence the “diverse tongues” of Pentecost. It is of course manifested in particular congregations (as Bishop Ignatius also assumes, gathered round the local bishop or at least meeting under his authority). And there is an implied contrast with particularist groups. The second century was a time in which many little groups invented a religion for themselves, usually based on an assumption that the supreme God had nothing to do with the mess of this world and the business of religion was therefore how to escape back to him. Nowadays the invention often takes the form of saying that the secular world has got it right and we ought to conform to it. But then and now, such groups sometimes steal the name of Christian and of the Church. That is why we insist on the faith as known and confessed at all times, in all places and by everyone as opposed to temporary, local and minority inventions. Inevitably, this rule is not a perfect distinction but it is a very useful warning to us all (and particularly to preachers) to control their speculations.

As you know, we meet at a time when what is probably a numerical majority of the Anglican Communion is trying to assert this rule against the Americans and Canadians (and their sympathisers) who have decided that they can invent a new code of morals based on liberal secularism. [*The reference is to the Jerusalem conference of GAFCON and the resultant Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans*] And even the Archbishop of Canterbury is trying to develop a weaker form of that rule, to hold as much of that communion together as he can. So this is not an academic matter. It is complicated by the question how perfectly Anglicanism was ever a form of the Catholic church. Archbishop Fisher (the first Archbishop of Canterbury since the reformation to visit the Pope and so the origin of our own efforts) for one asserted that we had no other programme, we had no doctrines “of our own”. Historians might doubt whether this had always been true, but it was certainly the right aspiration. The foundation documents of the Traditional Anglican Communion, and therefore of the Traditional Anglican Church in this country, maintain that aspiration. We have no wish to be separate.

It is an abuse of the sermon to tell people who cannot hear it what they should think or do. So let us come back to ourselves. “Catholic” is about what we have a right to expect from the Church (and a corresponding duty to do) because it is God's plan. Cyril, a fourth century bishop of Jerusalem told those adults he was about to baptise that the Church was Catholic because it:

- was throughout the whole world;
- taught universally everything that ought to be made known:
- was for everybody:
- was able to heal every sin; and
- was the natural home of every excellence.

This implies a massive programme, especially as applied within a small congregation, yet it is as true for us as for any other part of the universal Church. But not, of course, in our own strength. The current Roman catechism in its section on this part of the creed begins, as I did, with the quotation from Bishop Ignatius and goes on to teach that in the church “subsists the fullness of Christ's body united with its head; this implies that she receives from him the fullness of the means of salvation which he has willed”.

Now the Church of Rome also teaches that an essential feature of being Catholic is relationship with itself. The ancient justifications for this are twofold. First, that there is an obligation of relationship with the whole of the Church anyway, so it must be wrong to exclude any part. Second, that from very early times (and perhaps from the days of Peter and Paul) the Church of Rome was steady in its teaching and practice, so that Rome was the natural touchstone. More is now claimed; but this much is ancient.

*Preached on the feast of St. Peter. The Gospel (Matthew 16.13- 19) is relevant to the sermon.*

*I believe one holy catholic and apostolic church” (creed).*

The four words which we are considering tend to lead to the same truths, but with different slants. So do not be surprised at some repetition from previous sermons. Any Christian, on seeing the word “apostolic”, will assume it relates to the Apostles. That is true, and we have some idea who they are (possibly a more definite idea than St. Paul!) The point behind this title is that they are the “sent ones”, the ambassadors of Jesus (very similar to the “messengers” of the Lord, the angels, but, of course, human). Like all Christian ministers (and Jesus himself!) they exist to serve; but with the authority of their Master and Lord. John 13.13-7 can be studied with advantage here.

The first key point about the apostolic Church is that the Apostles preserved and handed on the original teaching and discipline. To some extent, this is because they overlap with the twelve disciples and so had direct access to Jesus' words and deeds. But probably more important (see Acts 1.21-2) they were also witnesses of the Resurrection. They handed on what they knew, forming a grouping (a “College”) to do so. Let us be clear. On any natural construction, the Teaching is older than the New Testament, albeit that is where it was (eventually) recorded. If we are “Bible Christians”, it is because we are first (logically) Apostolic Christians. Clearly no church can call itself “apostolic” if it rejects that Teaching. That is why the 39 Articles demand respect for the whole New Testament, and that it must be interpreted as a whole. It is not permitted to use one part of it to overthrow another. The equality of men and women before God is a vital truth which, to our shame, has sometimes been forgotten in the Church. But that truth must be held with and not used to overthrow the very specific rules in the Pastoral Epistles about the qualifications for ministry in the Church (husband of one wife).

Be clear, it makes no sense to retain apostolic teaching (in the narrower sense of the Christian faith) and alter apostolic discipline (order and morals). The two stand or fall together. Liberals have said “we wrote Scripture, we can rewrite it” and so cut out the passages which negate their secularist assumptions. Not so, and remain faithful to the apostolic deposit.

The New Testament is the best witness we have to the Apostles. But the Apostolic Teaching came first, and there is no simple cut-off point after which it ceased to be a direct influence on the Church. The books which survive from the fifty years after the New Testament writings rarely quote them – the authors of those books still depend directly on the Apostolic Teaching. Those books are an essential source for understanding how the Holy Spirit guided the Church into its stable future, not least in a Gentile environment, though we do not appeal to them as if they were on a par with the New Testament.

The other key point about the apostolic Church is “succession”. A bishop becomes, by his consecration, a member of the Apostolic College. He is consecrated by several other bishops (to represent the whole College) for a specific ministry which is within and in relationship to the whole Church. Usually, that is a ministry which another bishop has finished (originally only by death – resignation and moving to a different place were not acceptable). Occasionally, of course, there is a new ministry (for missionary reasons or because a diocese becomes too large for one man's ministry) but even this is essentially within the principle of succession. That is a major part of how the Holy Spirit guided the Church into a stable future.

All forms of Anglicanism claim (and the matter is not without difficulty) that this succession was preserved in 1559 and thereafter, so that there is (or was until the recent abandonment of apostolic teaching and discipline) a continuity back to the Apostles. Many also claim that the relationship to the Apostolic College has since been strengthened by various linkages with other parts of the Apostolic Church. TAC claims to have taken the least harmful steps available to preserve that continuity. But the Church of Rome (including the present Pope) teaches and the Orthodox Churches imply (at least by their behaviour) that succession was *not* preserved. Rather, they think a new, state-imposed, ministry was adopted, to which the old names were attached. This is one of the stumbling-blocks in the TAC application to Rome for recognition.

The apostolic Church is then a very clear and tangible matter. Are we faithful to the Apostles' teaching and discipline, for which the New Testament is the predominant witness? Are we through our bishops in (or at least sincerely seeking) relationship with the whole Church)? So we examine ourselves.

*Preached on Trinity VII. The readings are not relevant to the sermon.*

### **Concluding notes**

*The reader will notice repetition. To some extent this is inevitable in the topic. I have not removed it from the original sermon notes. Nor have I removed the contemporary references. The emergence of the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans did not cause the sermons, but is too important to ignore. The General Synod vote on women bishops was also in our minds, but raises no new theological issues.*

*There is very little here which is new. Much of it will be found in H. B. Swete “The Holy Catholic Church” Macmillan and Co. Ltd. 1915. Much the same material will also be found in the current Roman catechism.*