

THE PLACE OF TRADITION IN THE ANGLICAN CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

I was stimulated to think about this by the increasing annoyance I felt by conservative Christians, who claim to be, and are too often referred to as Traditionalists. This is the reverse of what I believe to be correct.

The Anglican Church has always prided itself on its commitment to good scholarship. We may not have the spiritual depth of the Catholics or the fervour of the dissenters but we have always argued that sound faith was based on the honest understanding of the biblical message, a recognition that the human mind's capacity for rational thought is vital to that understanding and that the interaction of these two, the biblical revelation of God, with human reason, creates a tradition which is both comprehensible and redeeming.

The Anglican Church has stood upon these three pillars, the **Bible**, human, God given **Intelligence**, and the collective accumulation of knowledge and experience, **Tradition**. To put it another way, if the Bible is the beginning, our intelligence is the means by which we understand it, and our thought about it is our tradition. This process is always inspired by the grace of the Holy Spirit. (John 16.13)

These three pillars do not stand alone, each illuminates and is related to the others. Indeed it is probably true to say that to separate them in this way is artificial because they are all part of a continuing process.

We cannot get away from this process. For better or worse we have understanding, and consciousness of ourselves as individuals; as individuals relating to each other and to God; as individuals as part of a group. The story of the Garden of Eden refers to this growing self consciousness and with it the taking of responsibility, of choosing what is right and wrong, and the consequent loss of innocence that inevitably goes with it. Cranmer said "There be those parts of Scripture more meet for our study than others." In that simple, and to most of us obvious observation, a fundamental step was taken. The experience of God is recorded in the Bible, but the text is not immutable and merely to be taken at face value. The Bible needs interpretation.

TRADITION IN THE BIBLE

I want to look first at the process of Tradition in the Bible itself. The Bible is not of course one book and there is clearly a developing understanding of God through out the Old and New Testaments. I remember as a child at my church primary school in Newbury, making a matchbox library of all the books in the Bible and giving them different colours to show what type of literature they represented, law, prophecy, history, poetry, wisdom, Gospel story, letters and so on. This is the important thing; the image of God in the earliest parts of the narrative is different from the understanding of God by the end. This is true, despite the efforts of later priestly redactors to bring coherence to what were obviously the different traditions of the groups of people who came together to form what came to be known as The people of Israel. (Manfred Weippert – The Settlement of the Israelite Tribes in Palestine.) The family, tribal god of Genesis (Gen. 31.30-32); grows into the God of purpose in Exodus (Ex. 3.1-10); is revealed as the God of Justice in Deuteronomy (Deut. 5.1-21); and the moral God in the Prophets, (Amos 5.14-15; Isaiah 59.1-9). The intimate

personal God, of the Garden of Eden, (Gen. 2.4a-24) becomes revealed as the Creator of the Universe. (Gen. 1.1 – 2.4; Amos 5.8; Psalm 19.1). The God of Israel, is revealed as the compassionate Father God of the New Testament (Luke 15.11-24; 1 John 4.7-12).

We can see the process of Tradition in the New Testament, and it has three elements. First there are the facts of Christ in the Gospels (Luke 1.1-4) and as summarised by Paul in 1 Corinthians (15.3-11). Second there is the interpretation of those facts especially in the first 14 verses of John's Gospel. And third there is the manner of life that flows from them as for instance, Paul taught in Romans (6.17) and Ephesians (4.25-5.2).

There is therefore, a continuing "tradition" even within the Bible itself; a continuing revelation, an accumulation of experience by which our understanding of God is enhanced and deepened. The Bible is the story of a winding quest in the search for God which is the consequence of his reaching out to us through the Holy Spirit, and most especially through the life of Jesus.

TRADITION AFTER THE APOSTOLIC AGE.

The process of revelation apparent in the Bible did not of course stop with the end of the Apostolic era. We continue to develop our understanding; by the accumulated experience of specially gifted and blessed individuals, the saints, Frances of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, Theresa of Avila and in our own church, perhaps Lancelot Andrews and John Wesley. I've picked these names at random as individuals who have been particularly able to communicate their own experience of God in a way that helps our understanding. And increasingly, also through the wonders of scientific and philosophical investigation. Thomas Aquinas and the Hubble telescope both offer us help to understand the God who created us, and our place in his creation.

A WORD OF CAUTION

There are some dangers evident in the process of tradition. Unless it is firmly based on the Bible, it can become detached from the religious truth it is trying to explain. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would lead us into all truth, this didn't include rocket science. He promised that the Spirit would lead us into the truth about himself, and through that understanding, understand ourselves and the world.

In the period immediately before the coming of Christ, various interpretations of scripture grew up around different Rabbinical Schools where understanding was passed down from teacher to pupil. This was not always a positive process. The teaching *about* scripture became almost as important as the scripture itself. It was a process that Jesus condemned. The word of God was "Transgressed", "made of no effect", "laid aside". (Matth. 15.3) On one occasion, Jesus was criticised for eating before washing, Jesus in turn accused them of hypocrisy. (Matthew 15.1-7; Mark 7.6-7).

It seems to me that this is a word of caution however, rather than an outright condemnation of tradition, because Jesus' own interpretation of scripture was itself an act of interpretation. An interpretation that we still have today, that the Old Testament has authority because Jesus saw that it pointed towards his coming.

The danger is there today. Tradition must never become a series of different fashions so that the church is tossed about like a ship without a rudder. This is the criticism of conservatives, and the question is entirely proper and necessary. To lose sight of the fundamentals of our faith would be as bad as the dangers of fundamentalism. The rather sterile religionless Christianity of Alec Vidler, has little to do with the faith in the Son of God, nailed to a cross, bursting from the tomb, and rising in glory to the heavens. There is no meat here to nourish the hungry soul.

There is no easy answer to this, just as there is no easy answer to the question as to which parts of scripture are more meet for study. We are not though, entirely on our own, the power of tradition itself, the Spirit, can also protect the church because it is the guardian of truth as well as the dynamic means of its declaration. As Gamaliel said, what is of God will last, what is not will pass away.

TRADITION AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

How does this process work in the life of the Church? I believe that tradition is the witness of the Holy Spirit. In the words of Jesus, **“When the Spirit of truth has come he will guide you into all truth.”**

The fundamental mistake made about tradition in the church is to think of it as something static and unchangeable; something which has been handed down and must be presented intact to the next generation. This is a fundamental error. It is the error made by many conservatives whether of the Reform or Forward in Faith variety, or the Africans, when they claim to be guardians of an unchangeable truth under threat by change. In fact change, or perhaps a better word is growth, is of the essence of tradition. I remember a remark of a Catholic priest from California. “People speak of tradition as if it’s wearing your grandfather’s coat. It’s not; it’s having babies!” Fidelity to the past must be a creative fidelity, it must never be simply a barren theology of repetition. It is not a dull mechanical process of handing down what has been received. We must understand tradition from within, for it is a personal encounter with Christ in the Holy Spirit. Nor is tradition kept only by the church – we hope that it lives continually in the church – but the dynamic, life giving Spirit which is tradition, can continue outside its confines. That includes in the lives of individuals or organizations not connected with the church, or even opposed to the church. I will give you four examples of what I mean in practice.

First example. We think of God as Creator and sustainer, the first words of the Bible establish that first principle. **“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”** In that sense we are all creationists. Even now we know that we only understand a tiny part of that fundamental element of the tradition. But science has opened our eyes to the glory, beauty, and some of the secrets and extent of God’s creativity. Darwin has helped us understand the process by which change and development of life is effected. Charles Kingsly said at the time of the publication of *The Origin of the Species*, 150yrs ago last year, “God allows creation to create itself.” The Hubble Telescope has revealed in spectacular beauty the wonders of the Cosmos, which expands our understanding of God and illuminates our thinking about our place in creation. We know that the universe is expanding, this together with other evidence suggests that the universe began in a mighty explosion; the big bang. This is now the official belief of the Catholic Church. The Tradition is renewed

and enriched with new knowledge. **“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”**

Second example. In the time of Jesus and even through the middle ages people believed that illness was caused by demon possession or sin. That was the tradition the church believed and handed down. Jesus cast out demons. We know this is wrong; it is no longer part of the tradition. Well, except in Africa of course. Science has forced us, very reluctantly in some cases, to change the tradition. We have a boy in our congregation, Nuno, aged ten, who has muscular dystrophy. It is a genetic disease of the X chromosome which means that the body fails to produce a vital enzyme which repairs muscle tissue. Sufferers seldom walk beyond 15yrs and die before they are 20. He's a bright little chap. New research in Perth Australia has found a possible treatment they think they can put a genetic patch in the DNA of sufferers which will stimulate the production of the vital enzyme. Tests are going on in London. It now may be that Nuno, his brother Rudolfo and Anna his mother may have some hope. Phil and Victoria emailed the video link. In the same quote from Genesis it says, **“God saw all that he had made and it was very good.”** This is not always the human experience. When John sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the Messiah, Jesus told them to look around them and tell John what they see, **“The dumb speak, the blind see, the lame walk, the poor hear the good news.”** All these are marks of the coming of the Messiah. Jesus by his ministry of healing came to make all things new. Do you remember the story in John (John 9.6) when Jesus healed a blind man by spitting in the dust, making a paste and smearing the man's eyes? Remember Genesis, **“Then God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed life into him.”** Those scientists in Perth have taken the very building blocks of life, the genetic code and have remade and renewed them. That is the Spirit of God at work. In the past the church has often opposed advances in medical treatment, vaccination for example. The church does it still when it rejects the findings of doctors, psychologists, sociologists, in the name of tradition. Actually what they are doing is opposing the work of the Holy Spirit.

Which brings us to the third example. The Bible clearly believes that women should take a subordinate role to men. There are many examples of powerful women in the Bible who play crucial parts; but it is men to whom the authority is given. We all know what Paul had to say about women in authority in the church. This was largely unchallenged until the enlightenment. Not so today, and secular forces, the feminist movement in all its forms, from Mrs Pankhurst onwards, in particular, have seen to that. No one here I imagine believes that women should not be priests or I dare say Bishops. To say this is a remaking of tradition is a colossal understatement.

Forth example. Our tradition is that we are stewards of our world, that tiny part of creation that is entrusted to us. (Gen. 1.28) And yet for such a fundamental concept what part has the church played in teaching about stewardship in this context? Certainly the monastic houses promoted good husbandry, crop rotation, care of the land and so on, but this is more to do with the production of food. The Bible has a lot to say about human beings in the landscape. That understanding has been transformed however by the environmental movement. This too is the Holy Spirit at work, deepening and widening the tradition. And yet it is opposed by the born-again-troglodytes of the so called Christian right, (though what they have in common with orthodox Christian faith seems to me to be largely coincidental).

These four examples and there could be many more in different areas of life, point to one thing, that tradition is dynamic not static. It is an enrichment by the inclusion of experience, not a preservation of past beliefs by exclusion. It is sometimes implied that the period of doctrinal formulation is at an end, yet this is not the case. I heard one enraged Cardinal say, "Are you seriously suggesting that 2000 yrs of tradition are to be overturned?" To which the answer is of course, "Yes. As the church has done many times in the past, and as it will do many times in the future." Indeed when its understanding does not change and grow, it will be dead, and in the well known cliché, consigned to the dustbin of history. Put simply, it is the living tradition which makes us credible and able to proclaim the faith to each new generation.

The church has always appeared at its most ridiculous and anachronistic when it has opposed obvious truths whether from outside or inside. We think of the opposition to Tyndale and his desire to bring the Bible to a wider readership; the persecution of Galileo; opposition to the great reform acts; opposition to medical advances; the ridiculing of Darwin. And today what, the ignoring of the understandings given by modern psychology which is threatening to tear our church apart; the opposition to planned fertility; opposition to the authority and role of women? All these are areas where the tradition of the church should have been enriched by new ideas eagerly grasped.

CONCLUSION

This idea of tradition as a living thing has been well expressed by George Florovski. "Tradition is the witness of the Spirit; the Spirit's increasing revelation and preaching of the good tidings.....to accept and understand tradition we must live within the church, we must be conscious of the grace giving presence of the Lord in it; we must feel the breath of the Holy Spirit in it.....Tradition is not only a protective, conservative principle, though that is certainly one of its purposes, rather it is primarily, the principle of growth and regeneration. Tradition is the constant abiding of the Spirit and not only the memory of words."