

Bishop of Maidstone

News Update – Pentecost 2017

Terror Attacks

Yesterday many churches celebrated Pentecost – the coming of the Holy Spirit and the Church’s ‘birthday.’ But they did so against the background of profound anger, grief and sorrow over yet another terrorist attack, this time in London. How can God’s Word help us with these conflicting emotions?

2 Thessalonians 2 has much to say about lawlessness and the man of lawlessness. There is no doubt that those who committed these terrible atrocities thought they were serving God, but their actions revealed the exact opposite: they were disobeying God’s law while thinking they were keeping it. By contrast, the Holy Spirit’s work in a person’s life is to bring home to us the true knowledge of God’s law. Jeremiah 31 tells us that the new covenant will involve the LORD putting his law within us and writing it on our hearts (31:33). When we put our trust in Jesus and are given the Holy Spirit, we become newly motivated. We realise the great blessing of doing things God’s way – loving our neighbour, not retaliating, speaking the truth and so on.

It is right that we should share the mourning of the nation over both the loss of life and damage to life resulting from the terrorist attacks. But at this Pentecost time, we should turn afresh to God in thanksgiving that we have the gift of His Spirit who helps us to want to be people of peace. The alternative is to make up our own ways of trying to please God – and the result of that can be truly terrible.

Evangelical Strategy

The recent consecration of Jonathan Pryke at Jesmond Parish Church (JPC) by bishops of REACH (formerly the Church of England in South Africa) and the announcement of GAFCON’s intention of consecrating a missionary bishop for Europe – including the UK – has prompted a number of questions from Anglican evangelicals about how these developments will affect my role and whether or not they are charting a way forward for the future. Renewed interest in the Free Church of England is also adding force to these questions.

(a) GAFCON & JESMOND

One of the important features of both developments is that they are intended to remedy current deficiencies. In the case of GAFCON, the intention is to meet the needs of those congregations which see themselves as Anglican, but, because they are outside the structures of the Church of England, have no clear mechanism for episcopal oversight. A GAFCON-sponsored bishop would be able to provide this and in so doing re-emphasize the reality of their communion. This might be especially important for those churches in Scotland which cannot go along with the probable change to the Scottish Episcopal Church’s canonical definition of marriage (to accommodate same-sex marriage) as well as those churches in England which are planning to plant new congregations and need men to be ordained to lead them.

In the case of Jesmond, the vicar, David Holloway, has long argued that if there is a deficiency in episcopal oversight that the Church of England is unwilling to remedy, then looking elsewhere for the deficiency to be remedied is a necessary way of remaining canonical. JPC has been in impaired communion with successive bishops of Newcastle over their views on sexuality but believes that the need to press ahead with church planting now makes it necessary to find a way in which leaders of prospective new plants can be ordained.

(b) A STRATEGY FOR REFORM

The strategy that conservative evangelicals in the Church of England have been following for the last two decades has been to seek the evangelisation of the nation by reforming the church so it is more clearly attached to the authority of God's Word. This involves a dual process of reform both from the inside and the outside. Within the CoE, we aim to win people to Biblical faithfulness, mobilise support for the Church's current doctrinal position, and use the immense opportunities provided by the CoE for multiplying gospel ministries. Outside the CoE, the aim is to model alternative approaches to church growth and governance so that the CoE is encouraged to change, opportunities for gospel work are taken and an Anglican 'home' is created for those who feel they cannot remain in the CoE. Inevitably the latter course of action will develop into a very mixed picture – but that is inevitable. The former course of action is tidier, but may be restricted by legal limitations on action. However, the important point to note is that both processes are motivated by the same desire to reach people for Christ, so it is very important that if we regard ourselves as Anglican evangelicals, we recognise our essential unity, even if others are taking a different path to the one that has convinced us.

(c) THE ROLE OF THE BISHOP OF MAIDSTONE

In one sense neither the Jesmond nor GAFCON initiatives have any direct impact on my role, since the legal basis on which I operate is related clearly to the issue of men's and women's ministry. While I can certainly minister in a number of settings (eg where in response to a PCC resolution under the House of Bishops' Declaration, a Diocesan Bishop suggests that I offer pastoral and sacramental ministry to that congregation, or where, in a diocese where I am an Assistant Bishop, a church requests my ministry), no congregation has a right to ask for my oversight on the grounds of their concerns over sexuality. Congregations which seek alternative oversight on these grounds either have to persuade their Diocesan Bishop to allow it or have to look elsewhere.

Nevertheless, my role has been specifically created in order to reassure conservative evangelicals that they have a voice in the College and House of Bishops. While this is particularly related to the issue of men's and women's ministries, I am not limited to that subject in what I can say. So while my legal permission to operate may be constrained, my ability to speak up on any subject – perhaps especially at the present time on sexuality – is not in any way constrained. Encouragingly, there are a good number of bishops who are clearly supportive of the points I make. This means that those churches which look to me for episcopal ministry can be confident that

they will receive – and be associated with – teaching that is clear about the application of God’s Word to marriage and sexual expression. God’s will for our flourishing is that sexual intimacy should be kept for marriage between a man and a woman for life and that outside of such marriage it is sinful. However, we are all prone to sin and so we should seek to show love and care to all people as we commend, and ourselves seek to tread, the road of repentance.

One of the questions often asked about my role is whether or not it provides a model for the sort of provision which could be made to deal with the CoE’s current internal disagreements over sexuality. The short answer to that is ‘no.’ The reason for this is that while my **authority** as a bishop comes from my consecration and is therefore not linked to any particular Diocesan bishop, my **legal permission** to operate is granted by the Diocesan. What I offer is ‘extended episcopal oversight,’ not alternative oversight. In practice this doesn’t matter for most parishes coming under my oversight, since their concern is about the nature of the ministry they receive, not its legal basis. For many, the issue of men’s and women’s ministry is also a ‘second order’ issue (ie it is about ‘order’ in the church rather than sin or salvation) – so a measure of compromise is acceptable. However, the issue of sexuality is a ‘first order’ issue where doctrinal disagreement must lead to broken communion. Any future provision by the Church of England over sexuality would have to accommodate this real separation in communion, which my role as currently constructed does not reflect.

Number of Evangelical Resolutions Now Exceeds 100

As of today’s date, 101 PCCs have passed resolutions asking their Diocesan Bishop to make arrangements to respect their theological convictions about men’s and women’s ministries. A further 50 are at various stages of moving towards such resolutions. It is good to see this continuing momentum in evangelical churches, although it is quite understandable that for a number this will take time to bring to a conclusion. Careful exploration of Scripture is often needed in order to overcome initial hostility to the idea.

Now that the number exceeds 100, my Advisory Group has suggested that I might consider organizing an annual gathering to consider issues affecting us all – or possibly one in the north and one in the south. Do let me know by email whether or not you would welcome such a development.

Recent Seminar on Preparing Candidates for BAPS

Finally, I thought you might be interested to read the comments of a couple of incumbents who attended last month’s seminar. The general view of participants was that this should be repeated – again both in the north and the south. Feedback on the day included the following comments:

“It was a wonderful blend of exhortation to be about the business of raising up leaders and practical application on how to do that - especially within the CofE... I learnt a huge amount and now feel much better equipped to prepare men for BAPs. I

can't work out why every incumbent wasn't there and would very much like to see it repeated.”

“An excellent day in so many ways... realistic, practical, biblical and encouraging. Highly recommended.”