

# **Presidential Address, 12 March 2011**

## **The Bishop of St Alban's Presidential Address**

### **Diocesan Synod**

#### **March 2011**

This morning we are going to spend time thinking about the

- Anglican Communion Covenant
- The need for more vocations and
- Our link dioceses in the Caribbean.

I want to reflect on the first and third on these, both of which are closely linked to each other.

### **The Anglican Communion**

Here in England the Anglican Communion does not feature high on our agendas. In fact, the only occasions on which I have been asked to speak or lecture on the Anglican Communion is when I have been abroad, visiting other dioceses. We take our Christian identity for granted – being Anglican is what we are.

However, I have been privileged to visit many other parts of the Anglican Communion, including dioceses in various parts of Africa, North and South America, India and Malaysia. Wherever I have gone, I have been welcomed as a member of the Anglican family.

One of the abiding impressions of the Lambeth Conference three years ago, which involved bishops from many different parts of the world, was the huge importance placed on the Anglican Communion by our brothers and sisters from other parts of the world. For example, the Congolese bishops who at great personal cost had left a country in civil war to share with us. I also remember the bishops from Myanmar where Christians are few in number and where many of them live in fear. They were passionate about the being part of the Anglican Communion and were worried about anything that would weaken it. When you are living as a minority in a poor part of the world, the Anglican Communion is not just a nice idea but it is an embodiment of mutual support and solidarity.

One of the reasons why the Anglican communion is so important is because in the bible one of the ways that God speaks to us is through 'the other' such as the poor, the sick, the prisoner (Matthew 25. 42-43) or the stranger (Genesis 18. 1-15; Hebrews 13.2). With such a strong colonial heritage it is tempting for us in England to think that the reason that we need links with dioceses in other parts of the Anglican Communion is so that we can help them. The reality is that we need them because through their ministry and mission, we will receive a deeper insight into the gospel. My hope is that we will give new energy and commitment to our Anglican brothers and sisters in the Caribbean as a way of taking forward *Living God's Love*. They have much to teach us about

### **Going Deeper into God**

### **Transforming Communities**

### **Making New Disciples**

There's one more thing I want to say about the Anglican Communion at this stage. We are living in a world which is changing rapidly. One hundred and fifty years ago you could go to an Anglican church in any part of the world and attend a service from the Book of Common Prayer, sing from Ancient and Modern and find clergy in cassock, surplice and stole. Today, those provinces and dioceses do not look to the Church of England in the same way. They have taken on board the need to express the gospel in ways that speak to their culture. They have to grapple with the issues facing their society. The result is twofold.

First, the Anglican Communion has had to say something about its doctrine and self-understanding as a family of churches – its ecclesiology. This was first articulated in what is now known as the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral.<sup>[1]</sup> Secondly, the Communion has also had to develop its structures, much in the way a climbing rose, if it is to flower well, needs to be supported by a trellis. These internal arrangements are known as the *Instruments of Communion*. They have evolved somewhat haphazardly, but are important none the less. There are four of them:

- The [Archbishop of Canterbury](#) is the spiritual head of the Communion. No church can be part of the Communion without being in communion with him.
- The [Lambeth Conference](#), first held in 1867, is the forum of bishops of the Communion who meet every ten years to maintain unity and collegiality.
- The [Anglican Consultative Council](#) which met for the first time in 1971. It meets every three years and comprises representative bishops, clergy, and laity from the thirty-eight provinces. The body has a permanent secretariat and is chaired by the Archbishop.
- Finally there is the [Primates' Meeting](#), which first met in 1979. It is a place for "leisurely thought, prayer and deep consultation".

So we need to note that if we were to adopt the Anglican Communion Covenant it would represent the latest in a line of developments which have been evolved in the life of the Communion in response to a changing context.

To set the scene for these two debates today I am going to reflect on two words found in the bible which have an important history in the life of the Christian Church: communion and covenant. Both words are fundamental to our faith as Christians and both relate to our debates on the Anglican Communion Covenant and our links with our Companion Dioceses in South America and the Caribbean. I am not trying to enter into the substance of the debate about whether or not we should sign up to the first or continue the second. What I want to do is give a theological framework and to set the scene of the biblical roots of the ideas which lie behind both of them.

## Communion

Communion is a word which refers to things being held *in common*. It comes from a Greek word *koinonia*, which is translated in various ways including *fellowship*, *participation* or *sharing*.

We use the word *communion* in many different ways but most commonly in the phrase Holy Communion – communion with God This is the central act of our worship as we break bread and drink from the common cup. This communion is a participation in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As St Paul puts it:

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation (*koinonia*) in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation (*koinonia*) in the body of Christ? (1 Corinthians 10.16)

But notice that in the next verse it becomes clear that because we participate in the one bread and the one cup we are also bound to each other:

Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf (1 Corinthians 10. 17).

St John makes exactly the same point, pointing out that there is an intimate link between our relationship with God and our relationship with each other. Here the same Greek word is translated fellowship, rather than participation:

We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship (*koinonia*) with us; and truly our fellowship (*koinonia*) is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1. 3-4).

The question is: what are the boundaries of this common life? Or to put the question in a different way: are there some things which are so central to the Christian life that they are indispensable? In terms of core *beliefs* the church worked away at this for the first four centuries and crystallised those beliefs in the great historic creeds which is why we say them in our worship week by week. Rather like those giant seaweeds with their holdfasts fixing the algae to the rocks below, but allowing it to float free in the cross currents of the ocean, so the creeds 'hold us fast' to our inheritance of faith, bonding us to the gospel while we respond to the different cultural currents of our age.

But experience points up another question: are there some things which are so alien to the Christian faith that we have to say they do not belong to our common life? You can find some of these debates reflected in the New Testament. So, for example, there are discussions about whether Gentile believers have to be circumcised, and whether or not Christians are permitted to eat meat offered to idols. In some areas, the church has shifted its position over the centuries, for example over usury and pacifism.

Throughout the history of the Christian Church we observe a counterpoint between *orthodoxy* (right belief) and *orthopraxis* (right practice). Together they form the creative core of Christian faith and life. Meanwhile, at the circumference, there have been skirmishes and debates about the boundaries and the extent of our communion, of our common life.

## Covenant

Let me move onto the second word: covenant (Hebrew: *berith*; Greek *diatheke*). Covenant is an important work in both the OT and the NT. Indeed, the name of the New Testament in Greek is *The New Covenant (he kaine diatheke)*. The origins of the Old Testament word *berith* are obscure but probably go back to an Assyrian word meaning 'to bind'<sup>[2]</sup> that is, the things that bind us together. Covenants are made both between God and human beings and also between human beings. These latter covenants fall into two main categories

1. Where a more powerful party imposes conditions on a weaker party (Exodus 23. 32; Deuteronomy 7.2; Joshua, 9.15; Judges 2.2; 1 Samuel 11.1; Jeremiah 34.8; Ezekiel 17. 13-18;).
2. Where the covenant is one of friendship, where there are mutual obligations which the parties enter into freely (Genesis 21. 27; 26.28; 31.44; 1 Kings 5.12; 15.19; 2 Kings 11.4). This is the sort of covenant which grants benefits but also requires obligations on one another.

Part of the debate about the Anglican Communion Covenant is whether it is about the first sort of covenant or the second sort. Is this a covenant where one group imposes itself on the other or is that the sort of covenant into which the various parties freely enter?

## The relationship between communion and covenant

But let me return to 1 Corinthians and to chapter 11. 25-28. Here we discover that this fellowship (*koinonia*) of the broken bread and common cup is in fact based on a covenant (*diatheke*) which God makes with his people:

In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant (*diatheke*) in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' <sup>26</sup>For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

In other words our common life is based on God's invitation and our response in choosing to enter into a commitment with him. In turn we make this same commitment to each other. The questions facing the Anglican Communion are:

*What level of mutual commitment do we wish to have?*

*What sort of covenant, with its obligations and privileges, do we wish to make with one another?*

It is why we are having a take note debate this morning so that everyone can have their say and we can all listen to the points on both sides before the matter goes to the deaneries and then returns here next year. Whatever our views, we need to discuss this matter in the light of the injunction in Ephesians 'Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ' (5.21).

But my final thought looks to the future. In English we habitually translate the term *diatheke* not as covenant, but as testament – as in the title the New Testament, rather than New Covenant. We use the same word in our wills as we contemplate our death and make our bequests to family and friends. 'The Last Will and Testament' is what is written on the top of the document.

So my question as we have this debate this morning is what sort of Anglican Communion we wish to bequeath our children and our grandchildren? I stand before you as one whose discipleship of our Lord Jesus Christ has been deepened and enriched through contact with Anglicans of other continents and traditions. Today we have an opportunity to reflect not simply on present realities but on future relationships. What will our 'will and testament' be to the next generation?

[1] The original purpose of the Quadrilateral was to give a basis for discussions about reunion with Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. However, it also gave definition to what constitutes the core of Anglicanism. It is based on four principles:

That, in the opinion of this Conference, the following Articles supply a basis on which approach may be by God's blessing made towards Home Reunion:

(a) The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as "containing all things necessary to salvation," and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.

(b) The Apostles' Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.

(c) The two Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself - Baptism and the Supper of the Lord - ministered with unfailing use of Christ's [Words of Institution](#), and of the elements ordained by Him.

(d) The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church.

[\[2\]](#) P. 108 in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol 2, Kittel, G. (ed.) Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964.