

## Sermon on 'Being Church' Part 2: Our Anglican Heritage

by Silvia Purdie

Mark 6: 1-13

1 Kings 8:1-13

While I was at Varsity in Wellington my boyfriend and I started going to St Peters Willis St – that's the big wooden church that greets you when you first come off the motorway. This was my first taste of a Traditional church, with it's high wooden beams and liturgical colours, eucharist every Sunday. I talked last week about coming from the Methodist church ... where we talked about God and sang about God but there was little confidence that God was actually present. Anglican Eucharist is founded on the extraordinary claim that in the body and bread Jesus is actually present, God really does meet us. And I found in the flow of word and action, with little chatter or fuss, the actual tangible presence of God, woven into the silence in that big wooden church.

This set me off on a most marvelous adventure ... the seeking and finding of God in stillness. This adventure literally took me around the world. I joined a group of Anglican young people, lead by the Anglican Fransican monks, to discover the roots of the faith, in awesome places like Canterbury Cathedral, and Lindisfarne holy island where the monks lived through middle ages. We also went to Assisi, home of St Francis, in Italy, and to Taize, a thriving modern monastery in France with its own distinctive style of worship and music. It was there, in the astonishing electric atmosphere of 5,000 people worshipping together in silence, there that I received from God visions and a clear sense of calling into ordained ministry. That was 22 years ago, I was only 25.

The thing about the Anglican church for me is that it connected me with an unbroken story of the Christian church, right back to Jesus, Paul & Peter, and through all the ages since.

The Methodist Church had taught me that after Peter became Bishop of Rome about 25 years after Jesus died, well, things just went downhill, and nothing very interesting happened after that until John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed back in 1738? As though there was a direct jump from the birth of the early church to the birth of the Methodist church.

The Anglican church opened up to me the treasures of two millennia of the Christian church ... heroes of the faith like St Francis, skills and habits of prayer, words of worship unchanged for nearly 2,000 years. I came to

understand depths of meaning in simple acts such as breaking bread. I learned to sit and be still. – not something many young people get to taste these days.

Time for a history lesson now. Let's start in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century after Christ, as increasing numbers of Romans came to faith in Christ. Some of these were soldiers in the Roman army, and some were posted to Britain. These were the first Christians in England. The church also sent church planters, and in those early centuries a small church grew there, which pushed back the influence of the druids and established centres of worship and prayer. You will know your English history better than me, so you probably know something of the collapse of the Roman Empire, the too-ing and fro-ing of people, including monks, between England and Europe, the raiders and the wars. Through all this the church held strongholds of learning, monasteries which preserved ancient texts and trained new generations of nun, monks and priests who did what they could among their people. These were also centres of medical knowledge, law and science. Relations with the Catholic hierarchy were strained at times – Rome was a long way away after all – but the English church stayed connected and mostly loyal. That was, until a King wanted to marry again after divorcing his first wife, and the Pope said 'no'. King Henry the 8th's sex life was the turning point for church history – history is a strange thing!

So, Rome and the Pope were out and the Church of England was formed, independent.

It was not so much the product of the Reformation as a continuation of the catholic church without the Pope. There were big changes of course. Priests and nuns were encouraged to marry, and many monasteries were torn down. Possibly the biggest change came with another royal decree –to translate the Bible into English. This would never have been allowed by the Pope! The printing of the King James Bible in 1611 was one of the most significant events in British history. For the first time, everyday people could actually understand what happened in worship, they could read God's word for themselves. Before that the gospel had literally been locked away.

A lot of the conflicts through the history of the church have, of course, been about money and power. I'd say that the biggest thorn in the side of the Anglican church is its money and its power. Through much of English history, the church has been in the possession of plenty of both. Local churches were funded by the local Laird. In the cities the churches owned large tracts of land. Bishops lived in palaces and had enormous political power. Have you even been to a Bishop's palace? I have, and it was truly obscene. Vast sums of money were spent on cathedrals.

We see the link between church and state most vividly demonstrated at a royal wedding ... the gold, the pomp, the ceremony, the blessing of church on royalty and royalty on the church. A match not necessarily made in heaven. The Queen of England is still officially the head of the Church – though Prince Charles has made it clear that this will end when she dies. He and his sons have no desire to be head of the Church of England!

Sadly, now, after 1 ½ millennia of cultural dominance, the Church of England is in serious decline. It won't be long before there are more Moslems in England than practicing Anglicans. They still have serious wealth and assets, but they're losing people faster than rats off a sinking ship.

The Anglican church in NZ is also heading into a major crisis, together with the Methodist and Presbyterian. Too many buildings requiring expensive earthquake strengthening, fewer parishes able to afford a Minister, less people putting their hands up for leadership.

What is fascinating for me is that we happen to be in a Diocese that is tackling the problems head on. In electing Justin Duckworth as our Bishop, our Diocese took a huge leap of faith. It's not just his dreadlocks and bare feet, he's never even been a parish minister. He has little investment in preserving the status quo. He has effectively declared war on the traditional view of the Anglican church as the church for the wealthy and well-to-do. His goal is to de-institutionalise the Anglican church. Not to get rid of the church as an organisation but to re-vitalise it as a living community of believers rather a bastion of privilege and tradition.

We had Wendy Scott here recently, who invited us to participate more fully in the life of the Diocese of Wellington. She asked how much money we pay each year - \$900. "It's a no brainer!" she said. "You're paying all that, you might as well get your money's worth!"

So the Anglican church in our region is trying to connect in new ways with the communities around us, with projects for child poverty and prison reform, strategies to reach out to the Least, the Last and the Lost. Bishop Justin and his team have a simple but powerful challenge to us: grow as disciples of Jesus, both individually and as family together, and reach out to the world around us. It's certainly not a quick fix for the problems of a declining institution, but it addresses the heart of the who we are as church and what we're here for, which is a darned good start.

And they are backing that challenge up with a solid plan for leadership training, children and youth ministry, and encouraging belonging and participation across the Diocese.

Time to ask you questions ...

firstly, how have you learned to sit still? What has helped grow in you a desire to meet with God in quiet places?

second, how do you feel about the traditions of the Church? Do you quite enjoy pomp and ceremony, robes and colour and formalities? Are there some traditions or ways of worship that you miss?

third, what about the wealth and privilege that the church used to hold? How do you feel about golden crosses and silver candlesticks, about our legacy of status?

and lastly, how do you respond to the challenge of Bishop Justin ... to be authentic followers of Jesus, to be family together as church, and to reach out to those who are struggling in our society?

Turn to your neighbour and share your answer to at least one of those questions.

Biblical themes:

1) wealth and power vs justice for the poor

2) stillness

also

Maori

Eucharist

Lectionary