

## *Three legs that help us to understand the Church*

WHAT I have to tell you today involves a bit of history. But then so much of what Anglicans do and practice is tied up with history. But first, I need to clear some misconceptions and myths about King Henry VIII.

Henry did not start the Church of England; in England the Church was called the Church of England for hundreds of years before Henry was born. Henry was not a Protestant; in fact when he was king, Protestants were regarded as heretics and were burned, while Roman Catholics were regarded as traitors and were beheaded. It was not that Henry was particularly bloodthirsty. He was concerned with people's souls, and to him Protestantism and Roman Catholicism appeared to pose real dangers to an individual and to the nation.

Henry did not want a divorce from his first wife. Henry didn't believe they were properly married, and what he really sought was an annulment. Henry would have been horrified if he knew a day would come when people imagined he was a Protestant who wanted a divorce and who started a new church. When Henry died it was with rosary beads in his hands and with a prayer to the Virgin Mary on his lips.

When Henry died, his son Edward succeeded to the throne. Edward was greatly influenced by European Protestants, and the church – along with the nation – swung towards Protestantism.

Edward died as a teenager, and his sister, Mary, became queen. Mary was a Roman Catholic, and in her zeal for Roman Catholicism many Anglicans (including the 66-year-old Archbishop of Canterbury who did so much to give us the old Prayer Book), were burned at the stake. This was one of the worst times in English history, and as a result of her zealotry and the number of people killed, Queen Mary has ever since been known as 'Bloody Mary.'

Mary was a tragedy for England. In her reign of only five years, she lost Calais, the last part of England's once extensive French dominions; but worst of all, more people were burned at the stake or killed in English prisons than suffered at the hands of the Spanish Inquisition during the same period.

Mary's life was full of bitterness. In the end she was abandoned by her husband and died childless.

Then in 1558, King Henry's other daughter, Elizabeth, ascended the throne. It was in Elizabeth's reign that peace and balance began to settle on the nation and on the church. Elizabeth knew England contained Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Protestants. And Elizabeth felt the nation – and the church – needed to be large enough to embrace them all.

It was in this period, I believe, that the Anglican virtue of tolerance began to shine. The Church of England was henceforth meant to be representative of the whole nation. It was in the reign of Queen Elizabeth that the Anglican Church produced one of its greatest theologians. His name was Richard Hooker, and Hooker developed a description of the Anglican Church that is beautiful, wonderfully accurate, and comparatively easy to understand.

Take a round piece of wood and imagine it represents the Church. For it to stand upright, it needs legs. So we give it the first leg, which stands for **THE BIBLE**.

The Anglican Church lays great stress on the Bible. All the church's services of worship, including its sacraments, are derived from what we read in the Bible. Nobody is to teach anything as being necessary for salvation which isn't taught in the Bible. The Bible must always be the first leg of the church.

But what about the things Christians have learned since the Bible was written? Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would lead us into all truth, so where is the place for these teachings if the Church depends on the Bible alone?

The Bible does not condemn slavery, for instance. Neither does the Bible take a position on over-population, or nuclear power, for these

things were all unknown in Bible days. There must be a second leg to uphold the church. And there is.

It is the leg of **TRADITION**, the leg of history, the leg that depicts the Spirit's guidance down the centuries. It was in the tradition of the Church that the creeds were compiled. It was in the tradition of the Church that the ministry of bishops, priests and deacons, came into being. It was in the tradition of the Church that the belief that God is a Holy Trinity was formulated. Tradition becomes the second leg of the Church.

But some people would ask: what about human reason? If God means us to use our brains, does it mean we must always be tied to accepting only the Bible and the lessons of history? What about the things we have learned in our own time – and the things we are discovering today? In 1931, for instance, a meeting of the world's Anglican bishops decided that using contraceptives was sinful. The next time the world's Anglican bishops met (it was in 1951), the bishops had learned a lot more about the growth in world population and the fact that contraceptives can reduce the spread of disease, and the bishops declared that the use of contraceptives was to be commended.

Can you see what had happened? The Bible did not know of contraceptives. There was nothing in the Church's tradition over the centuries about contraception. So the bishops continued to pray and use their reasoning powers.

Hooker said there must be a third leg, the leg of **HUMAN REASON**. The church is an organic, not a static, institution and some church administration will change according to circumstances. And when the leaders of the Church make a decision they are constrained to keep those three things in mind: the three things upon which the Church depends: the Bible, tradition, and human reason.

When I was newly ordained and was a curate of this cathedral, I attended an ecumenical conference in Lower Hutt. I remember a keen member of a different denomination challenging me about the Anglican Church. He told me his church was better because it believed in the Bible, and in the Bible alone. I replied I was sorry to hear that, because I believed in apple pie and I believed in my wife, and the Bible doesn't have a word to say about either.

What are you going to say, if a friend of yours who belongs to the Baptist Church, glories that his denomination believes only in the Bible? And what will you say, if a friend who is a Roman Catholic glories that his church lays great emphasis on history and tradition? And what will you say if a friend who belongs to a modernist church says he glories in human reason?

I hope you would say that the Anglican Church lays emphasis on all three. The three things that Richard Hooker described as the glory of the Anglican Church – the Bible, tradition, and human reason – have served us well.

But to return to history. People, who imagine that Henry VIII started a new church, conveniently ignore the fact that while Henry was alive on earth the Church of England continued to be recognized by the Pope.

After Henry died, and Edward ascended the throne, the Church of England still continued to be recognized by the Pope. After Edward died, and Mary came to the throne, the Church of England still continued to be recognized by the Pope. It was only in the time of Queen Elizabeth – three sovereigns after Henry – that a new Pope excommunicated the Church of England. Remember, we didn't leave them, they left us.

The Church of England has always tried to embrace Protestants as well as Catholics. It says there should be room for all. And even today, after nearly four centuries, we see the Elizabethan idea of tolerance reflected in the people chosen to be Archbishops of Canterbury. Years ago we used to call such people high church or low church members. Our last Archbishop of Canterbury was what we once would have called evangelical or low church; our present Archbishop of Canterbury is more catholic, what we once would have called high church. No doubt the next one will again be a bishop of the evangelical wing. I think that is wonderful, for it represents the balance that continues in the nation and the church.

Knowing about the three-legged stool is important. I don't think you can be a fully-informed Anglican without knowing about it. If I had my

way a three-legged stool (or at least a symbol of a three-legged stool), would be displayed in every Anglican Church, to remind people of the things for which we stand.

If I had my way, a model of a three-legged stool would be given to every person when he or she was confirmed.

As most of you know, the Isle of Man has a symbol of three legs, and the Latin motto that accompanies the symbol reads: "Whichever way you throw me, I will stand." It may be a good motto for the Church, as well.

On this day when Christians the world over are glorying in the truth that God can be experienced in three ways – as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – I also glory in the fact that the Church to which I belong – the Anglican Church – can be experienced in three ways, for it is propped up in three ways: by the Bible, by history, and by human reason.

And in thanksgiving for the truth of this, and the knowledge of this, I hope even the angels in heaven will join me in saying *Amen!*

**Preached in St Peter's Cathedral, Hamilton  
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