

ERASMUS

*The man who taught the need
for education, moderation,
and toleration*

RECENTLY I spoke a little about the history of our Church. I pointed out that the Anglican Church goes back long before King Henry VIII. The thing I wanted us most to remember was something said by a scholar named Richard Hooker four centuries ago.

Richard Hooker gave a description of the Anglican Church that is beautiful, wonderfully accurate, and easy to understand. He said the Anglican Church is based on a three-legged stool: the leg of the Bible, the leg of tradition, and the leg of reason.

This morning I want to mention another great scholar who helped shape Anglican thinking, and helped us become who we are today. He was the greatest writer of the 16th century. His name was Erasmus, who died in July 1536, exactly 470 years ago. Even today, our lives are affected by this man.

Did you read Aesop's fables as a child? If you did, you can thank Erasmus for rescuing them from obscurity and making them part of your early education.

If you have ever used the phrases like 'crocodile tears', 'call a spade a spade', 'A flash in the pan', 'no sooner said than done', or 'start from scratch', you can thank Erasmus for making those phrases popular.

I want to spend a few minutes talking about Erasmus, because the more we come to understand him the more we will come to understand the church to which we belong.

It is true that Erasmus wasn't an Anglican. He was born in Rotterdam and became a Roman Catholic friar. But he left the friary, went to England, loved it and spent much of his time there.

Erasmus wrote his most famous book when he was in England, and his great translation of the New Testament was done at London and Cambridge. He taught at English colleges. But most of all, Erasmus influenced a number of the important Anglican theologians of the time. He was a good friend of a number of Anglican bishops, including the

Archbishop of Canterbury. Erasmus had an immense influence in starting the movement for reform in the Anglican Church. It has been suggested that Erasmus seemed to have the mind of an Anglican, but I think that is a half-truth. It would be more accurate to say Anglicans came to have the mind of Erasmus.

Although Erasmus was a Roman Catholic, many Roman Catholics came to condemn him because they thought he was too Protestant. And although Erasmus had influenced Martin Luther, many Protestants came to condemn him because they thought him too Catholic. (Doesn't that sound familiar? For centuries, Anglicans have been criticized by some Catholics for being too Protestant, while some Protestants have condemned us for being too Catholic!).

Erasmus was a believer in learning, moderation, and toleration. And this was a gift he gave to the Anglican Church. Since then, the Anglican Church has generally been in the middle, trying to be a bridge church, endeavouring to embrace all, and seeing some good in both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism.

I want to mention three ways in particular in which Erasmus influenced our Church.

First, by his attitude towards education.

Erasmus was always in search of knowledge. On one occasion while walking across a market square he noticed a scrap of paper lying on the ground. He picked it up and read it, just in case it contained something of importance. Although he was credited as having one of the greatest brains in Christendom, he wasn't too proud to pick up a scrap of paper in search of knowledge. And he was always urging people to be tolerant of things they could not understand.

Our Church has been at its best when it too has always been in search of knowledge. It is for this reason our church started some of the first schools in Britain as well as in Australia and New Zealand.

Erasmus lived in an age of superstition, an age when people were afraid of ghosts and witches, an age when people were fearful of the unknown. But Erasmus was never afraid of truth. In fact, he looked upon truth as being one of the works of the Holy Spirit. He remembered the words of Jesus in John 16.13 that the Spirit of truth will lead us into all truth. And Erasmus wrote this: "Whenever you encounter truth, look upon it as Christianity."

Some people, of course, are afraid of knowledge. There's a story that in the 19th century when Darwin's theory of evolution began to be reported in the newspapers, one lady was heard saying to another: "Have you read about this awful theory of Mr Darwin? I hope its not true." Her companion replied: "Well, if it is true, I hope not many people get to hear about it!"

I believe a well-instructed Christian shouldn't be afraid of the truth, even if the truth appears, sometimes, to be painful. Jesus is reported in John 8.32 as saying: "The truth will make you free."

That was the first way in which Erasmus influenced our Church. By his attitude towards education.

Secondly, his attitude towards moderation.

Perhaps the most extraordinary achievement of Erasmus was his effect upon religion. When Erasmus was born, the Church in most countries held an iron grip upon thought, behaviour, and religious practice.

In those days, Christian belief was a minefield of required and prohibited beliefs. A single carelessly worded statement could get a person condemned for heresy. People burned each other at the stake over such issues as whether there were three persons in the Trinity or one person with three natures. Erasmus objected to this intolerance. He didn't just condemn the excesses of the medieval Church and society; he ridiculed them.

People were reluctant to challenge Erasmus, because he was the leading Biblical scholar of his age. He had a great influence on the translation of the King James Bible, and we can thank Erasmus for teaching that the Bible should be translated carefully from the original sources into local languages. Erasmus shattered the iron grip of the Church and opened the door for religious thinkers everywhere.

Before Erasmus, a person bold enough to challenge the power of the Church risked being burned at the stake, but Erasmus said such intolerance was mistaken. "Burning heretics is wrong" he said, "because only God can know who is really a heretic."

That was the second way in which Erasmus influenced our Church. By his attitude towards moderation.

Thirdly, by his attitude towards toleration.

Criticism of things we don't understand, said Erasmus, is of the devil. "This mania for slandering anything and everything – what does it produce but bitterness and dissension?" Erasmus condemned the persecution of Jews in those days, and he urged a toleration of minorities.

It was an age that regarded women as almost subhuman, but Erasmus had a liberated attitude toward women; he advocated the education of women and the fullest development of their minds. His educational concepts were so far ahead of his times that they were still being studied and implemented well into the twentieth century. We are still learning that the highest result of education is tolerance.

Erasmus had a horror of war and the killing that went along with it. He pointedly criticised the princes of his day, especially the Pope, for warmongering. Erasmus even had a liberated attitude towards sex.

Realising that many church leaders of his day were afraid of sex because they didn't understand it, Erasmus said: "I have no patience with those who say that sexual excitement is shameful and that (sexual) stimuli have their origin not in nature, but in sin. Nothing is so far from the truth... In other living creatures, where do these incitements come from? From nature or from sin? From nature, of course. It must borne in mind that in the appetites of the body there is very little difference between man and other living creatures."

In those three main areas – education, moderation, and toleration – our Church owes a great debt to Erasmus.

I repeat that it is true that Erasmus wasn't an Anglican. But he worshipped with Anglicans – he taught Anglicans – and he helped shape Anglican thinking at a very important stage of its development. More than one historian has said it is a pity the Anglican Church didn't canonise Erasmus as one of its saints, for he helped Anglicans define who they were.

Today, the Anglican Church is at something of the crossroads. The Anglican Church is facing a crisis because of differences in the attitudes and understandings of Anglicans in the West and Anglicans in parts of Africa. The Archbishop of Canterbury is struggling to mend the breach, and I am far too modest to attempt to offer any suggestion as to how this can be done.

Except for two things.

First, for all parts of the Church to remember what Richard Hooker said – how our Church is based upon a three-fold stool: the Bible, tradition and human reason.

And secondly, for all parts of our Church to remember what we learned from Erasmus, especially his insistence upon education, moderation, and the need for showing tolerance.

These things, I believe, are the marks of a well-instructed Anglican.
Amen.

**Preached in St Peter's Cathedral, Hamilton
by Archdeacon Reg Nicholson
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