

070701 Sermon for BCP

Six new priests were ordained in Derby cathedral yesterday. I am the only one whose 'first mass' is the BCP liturgy. I am the only one likely regularly to say the BCP liturgy regularly, and furthermore the only one likely to feel it a privilege so to do.

A privilege not because I feel at home with its theology—I don't, though its emphasis on the benefits for self-examination is welcome, if not taken too far. But a privilege for other reasons.

The BCP reminds us of the origin of the Church of England. It is, to be sure, a document of political control and expediency, but it remains the document by which the Church of England identifies itself doctrinally. If you want to know what Anglicans believe, read the BCP collects. It is the document to which I had to swear allegiance yesterday, and the prayer for the Queen's majesty reminds us that, like it or not, she is the Head of the Church. On the basis that the monarch represents the Almighty, and yet also the monarch represents the people against the excesses of politicians, I don't mind that – there is something about the interface between human and divine that accords with ancient doctrine of the church.

It was the BCP that seduced me from Methodism when I was a teenager. It was the poetry that brought me in, language the mission tool. It was, more than this perhaps, the knowledge that these same words had been said week by week without fail in that place for over 400 years (assuming 1549). This sense of continuity with the past is exactly what sacraments do. 2000 years of Christian history concentrated into the words and action of the consecration prayer. Every time the Lord's supper is celebrated, the past is gathered up and presented to us, then launched into the world transformed. The entire universe is compressed, sucked through the black hole of the messy and bloody crucifixion, to be dispersed with infinite acceleration to create the glorious new universe. The entire cosmos gathered up and borne for an instant by the priest for one brief moment in the holy mystery.

Christianity is, at heart, a mystery religion, but the mystery is too often forgotten or denied by matiness and banality. People of all ages are seeking a sense of otherness, and if the BCP can start to fill that search for me – and it did very counter culturally for a teenager – then perhaps it can for others too. Then tradition: Our Lord was a Jew loyal to the worship of the Temple in all its richness and splendour. He did not reject his traditions. The virtue of having an adequate sense of the traditions to which we belong is not conservation for conservation's sake (which I oppose), but is something that through recognising what the past has made available to us, enables us to adapt and develop these traditions for the future development. Tradition has much in common with trade, exchange, development. It has nothing to do with staying the same.

So this mystery, this BCP liturgy, despite the mess that gave birth to it, is a compressor of space-time, personal, historical and cosmic; it is a vehicle for the otherness of the divinity, and as part of our history it is a springboard for Christlikeness in the future.

What a privilege.