

**Sermon that Colin Slee, Dean of Southwark preached
at St Mary's Putney on Monday, 11 August at the
service which launched Inclusive Church.**



St Mary's Putney. Monday 11th August 2003

Isaiah 42: 1-9. Galatians 3: 23-29. John 3: 16-21

"Indeed, God did not send the Son in to the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." John 3: 17

When Bp Roy Williamson asked me to become (then) Provost of Southwark, he asked me to raise the profile of the Cathedral. When Canon Jeffrey John joined the Chapter he preached a wonderful first sermon and some members of the congregation told me I had competition, I repeated this compliment to the new Canon who simply said, "There is no competition"... well, I don't know about the preaching, but regarding profile, OK, I know when I'm beaten, and I want to say to all the Deans of all the other Cathedrals, "Southwark has the most famous Canon Theologian in the world, and we're keeping him". Thank you, Philip Giddings.

I have to go to conduct a funeral after this Eucharist so I only have this chance to make my small contribution to this day, which I welcome. It must end clearly, and with genuine goals if it is to be of service to the Church, people must go away and do what they have undertaken.

Moderate and open people are not good at organised lobby groups and

funding, and that may be a good trait, but moderate people also need to recognise there is a sin called sloth.

This will not be a good sermon because it has too much in it. I remember a Bishop of Truro preaching in St Albans once, starting, "I have thirteen points to make." — and he had — and he did.

We need to re-learn the vocabulary. I give you an example; I insist the Cathedral clergy wear black shirts — because it is a statement of history and origin, a uniform deeply rooted in tradition and monastic antecedents; none of those sky-coloured shades indicative of a deep mariological tendency which would shock their habitual wearers; nor the floral extravaganzas more symptomatic of a photo collage of the Chelsea flower show than the hard work of saving souls — and black shoes and socks; and be at the Daily Offices. Until General Synod said we could, we didn't conduct second marriages; we don't do same sex blessings or admit children to communion before confirmation. All that makes me a "liberal", a "moderniser". Then there are those who, like the Archbishop of Sydney, don't wear clerical dress, so you don't know who they are or what they represent, have liturgies which pay scant attention to canon law if at all, seek lay presidency at the Eucharist, re-baptise, are unaware that, after Alpha, the Greek alphabet continues with Beta and Gamma all the way to Omega. All that makes them "conservative".

There's a more important way we need to re-learn the vocabulary. Churches with a sacramental tradition, a high doctrine of the Church, have been willing, as for example when Dr Carey became Archbishop, to say, "OK we will work with him, we respect his office, we will do our best and we will co-operate." and they did. But when Rowan Williams was appointed we see that there is a different definition of a high doctrine of the church whereby an archbishop can be unwelcome if you don't like him, subverted, even by diocesan bishops and overseas archbishops; a high doctrine of the church can mean "rule or ruin".

Then there is the descent in to name-calling. I am actually sorry that my remark about the "Anglican Taliban" caused offence to some evangelical clergy and laity. Sorry, because I genuinely know and respect many of them are thoughtful and sincere, some far more radicalised by their faith than I am, they want the Church to prosper and they have spent much of their lives and ministries rejoicing in the wide variety of the Anglican tradition. The Taliban are, of course, a small fundamentalist group, very highly organised and well-funded who hijacked the government of Afghanistan and what it means to be an orthodox Muslim with the most terrible consequences within and beyond Afghanistan. The lessons are there to be studied. But then I want to say to those to whom I wrongly gave offence that some of the characterisation of the ordination of women, of gay and lesbian people, and of broad and tolerant churches as "failing" or "unfaithful" is deeply hurtful, and those who have been, even

remotely or passively, associated with such attitudes should not suddenly become sensitive when they find the roles reversed.

We all know this shows that there is always a deep temptation to be sucked down to the level against which one stands. We are called to greater fidelity of conduct, purpose and aspiration; that is one of the principles to be remembered today. Name-calling is useful shorthand but also a lazy and destructive loss of intellectual discipline, and, let's be completely honest, — enormous and cathartic fun — just so long as we remember to keep our sense of humour at all times and not actually believe in the names.

I was only able to be at General Synod part of the time, but was constantly being stopped by evangelicals who wanted to tell me how ashamed they are of what has happened and, apparently, in their name. Of course the ones who are pleased and not at all ashamed were not going to stop me, but if we are to pay attention to vocabulary then the word “evangelical” needs an ambulance because it has become a totem for values and aspirations which are much narrower and more judgemental than the gospel of the New Testament, “euaggelion” ever was. We can help to rescue it by being properly evangelical in our faith ourselves, that should be a part of today's agenda. But it can best be rescued by intelligent and thoughtful evangelical Christians, of whom there are very many, showing that they can use scripture with scholarship, care and dignity and not as a weapon for condemnation.

But there is an even more important vocabulary that we must learn. It is the vocabulary of biblical study as conducted from different perspectives. The debate about a faithful, inclusive and welcoming church is in many ways not a debate at all about gay clergy, women clergy, inclusive language or the Act of Synod and women bishops — all good media stuff. It is a debate about something that is not particularly media accessible or comprehensible — it is about hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics is about the interpretation of the meaning of scripture, as opposed to exegesis, which is about the practical application of the meaning of scripture. I am such a progressive liberal that I believe ordinands should study scripture in the original language wherever possible and should be equipped to help their congregations to do so also. I take scripture extremely seriously. I pay attention to the text in preaching; I may spend hours looking at commentaries and lexicons etc. My methodology is a world away from bible study groups which can become a sharing of personal responses, opinion, pious platitude and pooled ignorance. That is not taking scripture seriously. We can teach the evangelical tradition a lot about bible study. The really liberal tradition omits nothing, examines everything, engages with everything, is highly disciplined because nothing is allowed to go un-considered, liberals take scripture deeply seriously. A high doctrine of scripture is an Anglican gift to the Church of God from, and since, the Reformation; Word and Sacrament held, and holding, together. I want to encourage you all not

only to take your own hermeneutics seriously but to find ways to engage with those with whom you may not feel a natural common ground and discover their hermeneutics also. And when the hermeneutics are done then the exegesis is informed and better applied. Too many people are failing to recognise the need for a rigorous study and hermeneutic before they even begin an exegesis, if we had that rigorous study we would not allow the Church to become a vehicle of prejudice, misguided exegesis.

One of the ways we can help is by blowing the trumpet of liberal and catholic minded, open, welcoming churches rather better; for too long we have allowed the mythology to develop that it is only the conservative evangelical churches of the affluent neighbourhoods which are prospering. Indeed they may be, and the image that they present, of a judgemental and exclusive church may be one reason a large part of the 73% of this country who call themselves Christian don't actually attend church, they don't like that image, it is untrue to their Christianity, but there are churches, like this one, Southwark Cathedral, St Albans Abbey and Great St Mary's Cambridge all of which I know, and many more, which are doing their job well but do not boast. In particular, there are inner city and rural parish churches which are very healthy and faithful, but they are also different, because they are broad and available to the entire community which may be very small, and they are not based upon prosperity values. Perhaps we need to blow some trumpets on the rooftops.

Another way is by ensuring that the abiding sin of sloth does not creep in. Open and welcoming churches does not mean sloppy, they should be on time, well-ordered, well-preached, well-presented and above all, well-prayed. One of the greatest tools of evangelism is excellence; people are attracted to worship that clearly places the highest possible value on the quality of what is being offered to God time after time after time. If lonely clergy find the Daily Offices hard, and goodness knows they are, then organise teams of people who will be there with them day by day so that we are better at praying together. If you pray together you can work together, if you do not, then there is no chance. Daily prayer and the Offices of the Church of England is the way of excellence. It is also the way of attention to the whole of scripture and tradition through the lectionary and guards against "pick'n'mix religion" which focuses on favourite passages and pet themes.

We need also to recognise the politics with which we are working. Conservative evangelical churches tend to be in very prosperous neighbourhoods, or if not, then they attract very prosperous eclectic congregations. Many of the clergy, not least among those who have been identified as conservative and evangelical, are prisoners of their own pews. In the catholic and so-called liberal broad churches of the Church of England we have been working for several decades to empower lay people so that they are a proper balance to the charge that "Father always knows best". We need to recognise, however, that within the

Church of England, as with so much else, there is an opposite expression, it is Anglican congregationalism whereby the minister knows little and is at the behest of powerful and articulate laity to the degree that clergy feel they cannot declare themselves or their hermeneutics in leadership, because life would be made impossible for them. They need help, sensitively and carefully in developing stratagems that bring their congregations with them and teach a gospel which is not simply based on personal opinions and has scholarship and research.

There is another, unpleasant, area of politics which today's discussions should also address. I have been asked, more than anything in the past weeks, about schism and about money being withheld. If today's discussions are seriously addressed to the unity and openness of the Church of England then these threats need confronting head-on. Not only are they an abuse of money and a proper doctrine of the Church but they are also open to a reply. It would be wonderful if today's gathering began some organised response to the coercion of the withheld quota. Central, moderate and catholic minded congregations can very easily do this by undertaking to make up the difference of any diocesan shortfall and thereby face down the threats. I believe that congregations will welcome this request that they act with generous principle according to their beliefs. It may be time to call some bluffs, we will be amazed by the response, not least from all those who have felt excluded by the image of

the self-righteous judgemental church who are willing to belong to and contribute to a forgiving church in which we are all recognised sinners.

We need also to address the strange notion of schism whereby people have such a low view of their baptism, and such a limited ecclesiology, that they think they are entitled to threaten schism. First let us acknowledge that the Church is already divided — between those who attend in some form and the many millions who do not and of whom a great number feel excluded, unwelcome, judged and condemned. They are baptised, as you and I are. They are baptised as those who now threaten to leave the church are. Today's Epistle put it thus, "for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." So wherein lies this threat, does it have any doctrinal content? If Bishops are a focus for unity then they must discern what that actually means and where the boundaries of unity are to be placed, or are they meaningless? To those who believe that schism is a threat worth making I would say the boot is altogether on the other foot. Schism may doctrinally occur when the Church tells someone they are no longer acceptable as a member, it is not something a member, or a group, can effect, that is different, that is sectarianism.

I have said little directly of today's scriptural passages, all of which were and are the basis of this sermon. I will not trivialise any of them by exploiting texts to add a pious gloss. Each one of them speaks of a gospel

church, including Isaiah, and every one of them speaks of the cost of that goal in different ways. I wish this gathering well and I hope that it may be the beginning of a more confident and courageous Church of England which ultimately brings many more in to a wide and generous love reflecting God's vast embrace founded upon Word and Sacrament expressed in prayerful excellence. AMEN.