

Read the Archbishop's address to the General Synod in London today.



Change unsettles. It can unsettle at a personal level. When our first grandchild arrived, I was so unsettled that I could not think of an answer to the question “what do you want to be called”. I had called my grandfather grandpa, and I could not possibly be THAT old. Unnerved by the change, as well as just having become a Bishop, I blurted out (humorously) ‘My Lord Bishop’ – so, to my death and for year afterwards I will be Bip.

Change unsettles us individually and collectively, throws our compass into confusion, morally, and in attitudes.

In Deuteronomy 8, Moses speaks to the people of Israel about the consequences of their conquest of the promised land. It is one of the key passages for the Deuteronomist, whose book is foundational to the understanding of so much of the Old Testament. Moses sets out in stark deep contrast the change between the nature of being a people wandering in the wilderness and of being a settled people in a rich and fertile land. The chapter can be summed up by the words ‘Remember God’.

They are to remember that it was God who brought them out of Egypt, that it was God who preserved them in the wilderness through the miracles of the manna and of quail and through water emerging from rocks. They are to remember that God was the strength that overcame their enemies, and the wisdom that guided them through the wilderness. They are to remember that their very existence in the promised land is only by the grace and gift of God. Once they are in Canaan they must remember and teach each other that they depend entirely on God, and that none of what they have has been achieved by their own efforts. Dependence on God alone is the key mark of the community of faith.

Moses sets out this contrast in such remarkable terms because in the settled life of the promised land there will be an enormous change to their sociology, to their geography, politics and thus a great danger of a massive change to the basic theological premise that they are fully dependant on God.

Change unsettles us, it pulls us away from the moorings of virtue and theological truth. 'Traditioned innovation' (a phrase used by the theologian Greg Jones and of which more later) meant that they would remember, and remembering, would continue in faithful obedience. What I would term, 'Faithful Innovation...'

'Traditioned innovation' reoccurs again and again and again in the Bible. There is not time to go through all the examples, but obvious ones would be the growth of the Empire under David and Solomon, the division of the Kingdom, the fall of the Northern Kingdom and quasi-colonial status under various great powers, the Exile and the Return. And that does not even take us into the inter-Testamental times, or through the ministry of John the Baptist, announcing the most dramatic change, which is then seen, the inbreaking of God through incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and the gift of the Spirit: God produced a cosmic tectonic shift which nevertheless linked perfectly into the history of the people of Israel.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the tectonic shift is worked out in practice. The people of God, the Church formed in the Acts under the apostles are challenged to adapt to Spirit driven realities that they could never have begun to imagine by themselves. The greatest challenge was the incorporation of the Gentiles which was hinted at, promised but never fully understood in the Old Testament prophetic traditions, and was now made real. The Samaritans, the Ethiopian Eunuch, and particularly Cornelius - all in what we now call the Holy Land - opened their lives and committed themselves in faith to Christ.

More than that, Paul is transformed on the road to Damascus and his ministry bears extraordinary fruit in areas of the Jewish diaspora well beyond the boundaries of the historic kingdom of Israel. Now it even includes the oppressive Romans, the Pagan, Greeks, numerous other idolaters and people beyond the law.

With much struggle, yet by the grace of God, the Church adapted without abandoning its tradition. Today we also see ourselves as children of Abraham, welcome as children of God, as Paul sets out so beautifully in Romans 9-11. Never, as the centuries have passed, has the church had the luxury of remaining unchanged. Through Popes and Reformers, through men and women monastics, through movements of lay people and through Bishops, the Spirit of God has disrupted stasis and caused the church to reimagine its shape and ministry. Such disruption is ever more true as the church today hears the voice of its global membership amplified by social media, and is ever less able to live as the church in one country - to misquote a phrase of Stalin's - or one tradition only.

In the Church of England, as every other church, we struggle with change and stability. In 2016 the Faith and Order Commission, published an excellent book edited by Loveday Alexander, Mike Higton and Bishop Christopher Cocksworth, it was called 'Faithful Improvisation', on the subject of leadership in times of change. Previously Middleton and Walsh (in a book published in 1993 'The Truth is stranger than it used to be') wrote that "Christians need to indwell the biblical drama by serious, passionate study of the scriptures. This indwelling requires us to become intimately familiar with the biblical text in order to gain a deep, intuitive sense of the story's dramatic movement and the author's plot intention ... the purpose of the indwelling would be to ground faithful improvisation ... this requires taking the risk of improvisation that is creative, innovative and flexible".

These discussions and that quotation point towards a challenge that we deal with here, and is faced by every church, chaplaincy, Religious Community or any gathering of group of Christians. How do we reimagine the shape and reality of the Church, so as proclaim the gospel afresh in each generation, as is said in the Declaration of Assent?

Our Quinquennial goals call us to spiritual and numerical growth, serving the common good and reimagining ministry. Note the wording, we agreed to reimagine, not to tinker with ministry. I think it is arguable that although we have made a serious start to reimagining ministry, with numerous reports in every area from rural ministry through education to the ministry of the laity (so long neglected) and within renewal and reform, we have not yet fully lived a reimagining of ministry. Yet reimagining is demanded by the times in which we live, by our experience of church which is changing and developing, by the impact of an ever more effective contribution to the common good that we *are* making in an age of austerity and by the nature and turmoil of our society. We are seeing wonderful changes such as Fresh Expressions and Pioneer Ministry, innovations in training and so on. However, I often wonder, 'Is that it?'. Are we sufficiently attuned to the ever present work of the Holy Spirit calling us on?

We hear the voice of the Spirit, as I have said, ever more clearly from overseas as well as at home. We've heard it this morning, and I think many of us were moved near to tears. But we hear it with every tweet, with every blog, in a way that was historically impossible. The Anglican Communion is a greater reality through modern communications, and that means that the questions of change are ever more complex, unless we reject our catholicity and the very concept of the church as universal.

So how do we rise to the challenge of change in this generation, while in the sentence I quoted earlier and the FAOC book, developing habits of faithful improvisation?

In times of change, there are two great temptations which afflict all institutions that have long traditions and well-established patterns of action.

First, there is the 'throw the baby out with the bath water' approach. People call for radical change. To call for radical change without being aware of the traditions that underpin and secure the structures to which we belong is likely to lead to disaster, typically through division. It stirs fear rather than hope, and encourages a bunker mentality rather than a willingness to see transformation.

Within Anglicanism we have always struggled to find a distinct identity, a family likeness. It has been a happy struggle because it has led us to being both catholic and reformed, and to experiencing our identity flexibly in different parts of the globe, yet within a tradition. One, albeit little known attempt to define the tradition which has held us at least since the 16th Century, in one form or another, is the Chicago Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1886-88. At a time of great intellectual ferment and immense challenge to the global church, as Anglicanism began to come to terms with the fact that it had huge numbers of worshipping Christians in many different countries, the Chicago Lambeth Quadrilateral set out the boundaries which still define what is required to be Anglican, that is, in communion with the See of Canterbury.

The elements are the Scriptures, the Creeds, the two Dominical Sacraments and the historic episcopacy, locally adapted. Note those words.

The statement of the Chicago Lambeth Quadrilateral reflects the family likeness by giving broad room for diversity of culture and tradition while keeping ultimate boundaries. The transmission of the historic episcopacy holds us to being part of the universal Church back to its earliest years. The Scriptures anchor us in the revealed purposes and will of God, accessible in our own languages, inspired by the Spirit of God, 'living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword', endlessly fruitful in their direction of the Church and their unfolding of the mission of God.

The Creeds set out our doctrinal basis and the Dominical Sacraments reinforce our catholicity and our link with Christ, and the essential point is that we do not invent or create patterns of worship and action, we respond to the prompting of the Spirit. It is a collaborative process.

So one mistake is to imagine we can change everything and the other mistake is to believe we should change nothing.

Any tradition that is incapable of adapting is also one that is doomed to death. Professor L Greg Jones, who was at Duke University in the United States for many years, is involved in some of the training for bishops. In one of the pieces he wrote, he says this, "Tradition is fundamentally different from traditionalism. Jaroslav Pelikan, in 'The Vindication of Tradition' characterised the difference when he wrote, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." People who bear a tradition are called to be relentlessly innovative in ways that preserve the life-giving character of the tradition."

That rings so many bells, I am sure, in many minds. We all know the expressions we hear at every level in any large institution, including the Church. "We tried that in [insert date a long time ago] and it didn't work." One speaker summed it up both humorously and accurately by saying that there is a range of approaches to change in churches. At one end there are the traditionalists, who feel that even if something has only been done twice before, it must never be changed. At the other extreme are the so called radicals who feel that once something has been done twice before, it is high time it was thrown out.

In the Bible, both in the Old Testament and the New, we find constant issues of adapting to change. To go back to Professor L Greg Jones, he quotes a friend of his who is a New Testament scholar whom he asks to react to the phrase "traditioned innovation" as a pattern of thinking. The reaction was: "The New Testament. Indeed, the whole of the Scripture."

What he calls 'Traditioned innovation', or I think better for us, 'faithful improvisation' is essential to our understanding of what it means to be a Church today.

Reimagination requires material on which to work, traditions from which to spring. It is impossible to reimagine in a historical or traditional vacuum. We can only imagine what is already in our minds as a possibility, and therefore we draw on what we know and see and have experienced. The gift of one another and of sharing possibilities together, embedded in a deep reading of the scriptures, triggers imagination on a cumulatively far greater scale than anything we can do by ourselves, and thus collegial working as God's people enables new possibilities, greater imagination all securely anchored.

We fear those either who seek to lock us into a pattern of ministry that lacks innovation or those who want to abandon the tradition. The greatest problem with either is that they deny the way in which God has worked through the Church when the Church has gathered itself most effectively to deal with deeply changed circumstances. When the Western Roman Empire collapsed, when the Eastern Roman Empire was overrun a thousand years later, when the Church had divided in the Great Schism and then again in the Reformation and innumerable times since, on each occasion new life has sprung up when Christians have prayerfully found ways of 'faithful improvisation', held in love for one another.

What does this mean for us when we seek to reimagine?

It means that scripture, and our history and our tradition remain key parts of our thinking, along with reason. It also means that in reimagining collectively what it is to be God's people, and to exercise ministry through lay and ordained, through every part and person within the family of Christ it requires 'faithful improvisation which is full of love for one another, and so sets a future for the Church at the centre of God's will.

Such a future will demand immense sacrifice. It requires our willingness to be more concerned about opening our doors and throwing down barriers and boundaries, than protecting our frontiers and keeping the enemies out. It requires sacrifice because we follow the one who sacrificed by giving his life on the cross, who was God himself but did not count equality with God something to be grasped.

Yet that sacrifice is held in the context of a tradition and a faith which takes us from cross to empty tomb, from empty tomb to the Mount of Olives and ascension, and from ascension to the upper room of Pentecost and finally will take us to the fulfilment of the coming of the Kingdom.

'Faithful innovation and improvisation must cause us to look afresh at our structures and our habits. Our development of the ministry of all the baptised, as opposed to meaning only the ministry of the ordained or licensed, requires innovation, not merely a few tweaks. Our approach to safeguarding needs culture change. Our renewing of vocations, and their development and support requires both clear tradition and huge innovation. We must innovate, within the tradition, in our attitudes to episcopacy. The parish system and its links to natural communities, the issues of buildings, our attitudes to inclusion, all require faithful and faith filled innovation and improvisation.

It cannot be done quickly, but if the church is to be available to God it must be understandable to people with whom we minister, among whom we live, simply, whom we love. It must stand clearly for its history, live out of its traditions and yet see the promised land and be willing to give all and risk all to get there.

No institution exists by right, we must re-earn our existence in each generation, that means change. But the questioning of ourselves, our attitudes and structures, must be in love, and faithful to the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation. We must reimagine, but do so improvising afresh in tune with the Spirit.

If that is truly our aim, we cannot either be traditionalist nor radically abandoning our traditions. We have boundaries and limits set by God himself, to which we are called to adhere out of love for God and Jesus Christ and out of love for one another right around the world, and indeed in love reflecting the love of God for the world itself. We have a mission given by God a call to make disciples, from Christ Himself, which must overthrow all particular interests, all personal desires. If we may develop a love filled, faithful improvisation we have the certain hope of a Church renewed and revived, serving the Common Good, lifting up the Glory of Christ and revealing the Kingdom.

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