

Mince Pies or Cup Cakes?

Tradition and the Gospel

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As we approach Christmas, we're confronted with perennial questions. How do we understand the incarnation. What do we make of the birth narratives of Jesus Christ. How do we understand the virginity of Mary? You know the sort of thing. And those of us who preach around Christmas are presented with challenges – what we say and how we say it, so as not to encourage naivety and at the same time not to destroy the magic....

But I'm told that there's another urgent question emerging at Christmas, now. Which is this – do you want a mince pie Christmas



or a Cup Cake Christmas?



As you plan your carol services are you going to fill tables with plates and plates of juicy filled mince pies, or are you going to go for something light and fluffy and pink?



Are you vegetarian, or vegan and how does that limit your choice?



Or are you a plutocrat, getting those delicious deep filled mince pies from Sainsburys...



You may be thinking – how can we possibly have cup cakes (or fairy cakes, as they’re also known) at Christmas. What a ridiculous question. Or you may be thinking, Oh God, is it Christmas already? Not another mince pie!

Lying behind the question is the sort of person you are – the sort of Christian you are. Do you, by instinct, follow what’s always been done? Or do you, by instinct, want to experiment?

The subtitle of this talk is, tradition and the gospel. It kicks off the Inclusive Church conference, BeAttitude. According to the brochure, “in the recognition that the church is in the process of changing very fundamentally, we’re hoping to do some serious thinking about how the church can re-engage with a disaffected society, offering something which is both prophetic and nourishing as well as being profoundly inclusive.” We’re here, in other words, to reflect on where we are, and try and work out what we can offer – as inclusive Christians – to the church and the world, a church which seems often completely out of its depth and a world which is at best uninterested and at worse downright hostile.

Here we are, beginning the third residential conference for Inclusive Church. We’ve existed for eight years, during which time we’ve worked hard to bring about the sort of radical welcome that we believe is at the heart of Christianity. But if we look at what’s been achieved, I have to

say that the results are mixed. We are, please God, nearly at the point of enabling women to be bishops. That is progress, and progress to be shouted in the street – although why we’ve had to wait until 2011 for that to happen does beg some serious questions! But in every other area of our work – mental health, poverty, including black and minority ethnic people and welcoming LGB and T people, it seems to me that the progress has been at best minimal and at worst non-existent – indeed, in some cases we’ve gone backwards. I reread, on Sunday, Peter Selby’s amazing address to Word on the Street – When the Word on the Street is Resist – and quite apart from being once again humbled by its depth and its analysis, I was also saddened by the fact that even despite him and so many others, we’re not much further forward than we were.

Why is this? Has Inclusive Church been an ineffective organization, or are the forces ranged against us becoming more well organized, or is there something more profound going on?

I’m sure that there is much that IC could have done better, but I don’t think it’s simply down to us that this state of affairs exists. Or down to us and our partner organisations and churches, many of whom I’m delighted to welcome here. And I don’t think the conservatives are becoming better organized, in fact I think they’re losing power and credence. But in spite of that, we’re still stuck. Why?

The title of this talk – or rather the subtitle – is tradition and the gospel. It’s not, at first hearing, a very inspiring title – in fact my heart sank slightly when Dianna pinged it over to me on email. But I’m glad to have been given it, because there in those two words we have, encapsulated, the reason why the forces against us seem so powerful. Seem, I say, not are; the forces are given power which they do not deserve, and one result of this conference will be, I hope, an increased confidence in our power to bring about change.

Be that as it may. What's going on? Why are we still stuck in the mud? Why are there fewer black and minority ethnic people in General Synod than there were last time? Why are we still unable to offer an unconditional welcome to those who don't quite fit – the poor, the sick, the needy. And why are LGBT people still being scapegoated as the representatives of modernity?

Because of a misunderstanding of tradition, and a misrepresentation of the gospel. Because tradition has been taken, and turned into a shibboleth, and used as a barrier, a bulwark, a wall against change; and because the gospel has been traduced, belittled and squeezed so that it fits conveniently into the life of an institution which is bemused by and afraid of the world around it.

The Preface of the 1662 edition of the Book of Common Prayer opens: “It hath been the wisdom of the Church of England ever since the compiling of her publick Liturgy, to keep the mean between the two extremes, of too much stiffness in refusing, and of too much easiness in admitting any variation from it.” But the difficulty of deciding which proposed variations are acceptable and which are not is acknowledged by the compilers: “..... and therefore of the sundry alterations proposed to us, we have rejected all such as were of dangerous consequence (as secretly striking at some established doctrine, or laudable practice of the Church of England, or indeed of the whole Catholick Church of Christ) or else of no consequence at all, being utterly frivolous and vain. But such alterations as were tendered to us ... as seemed to us in any degree requisite or expedient, we have willingly entered into.”¹

So far so good, you might say. There in one of our founding documents is a recognition of the need to accommodate change. The Church of

¹ Preface, Book of Common Prayer 1662

England was forged in the crucible of religious strife; it was forged, very specifically, by Elizabeth and her advisers in an attempt to bring that strife to an end. It has, you might think, change built into its DNA. And in many ways, it has accommodated change. The language we used in worship this evening, the diversity of practice within the C of E, the welcome afforded to women priests - I know it's patchy but overall, huge progress has been made - all that, I agree, is good. But in some fundamental areas, the possibility of change has been actively resisted - indeed, change will, if the Anglican Covenant is introduced, become even harder - and the reason given for that is that these innovations breach tradition.

The tragedy is that in speaking thus, the leaders of the church and those who are resisting greater inclusion are traducing tradition and forcing the church into a straitjacket. I recently read a history of the photographic cooperative Magnum by the writer and thinker Michael Ignatieff. It was formed after the second World War by four news photographers - Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, George Rodger and David "Chin" Seymour. The aim was to offer photographers the chance to work independently, often without a commission, in the knowledge that their work could be sold or syndicated across the world. Cartier-Bresson described it as "a community of thought, a shared human quality, a curiosity about what is going on in the world, a respect for what is going on and a desire to transcribe it visually."²

² Henri Cartier-Bresson, Interview with Herve Guibert, Le Monde, 1947



The cooperative is still thriving, sixty years later, because, according to Michael Ignatieff “The new generation [of photographers] seems to have understood the paradox that a great tradition forbids imitation and commands dissent from those who would wish to stay true to its essential vision.”³

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It seems to me very clearly that that is the context in which we should be working; our task is not slavishly to imitate what we imagine our forebears to have done but absolutely to dissent to what’s handed on to us SO THAT WE CAN REMAIN FAITHFUL TO IT. Dead fish, as they say, don’t swim against the current.

Which leads me on to the question; what is the essential vision to which the tradition bears witness? The second half of my title; the gospel. Tradition and the gospel.

I was asked by a diocesan bishop recently to go address his clergy on the questions of human sexuality. In his letter of invitation he said “the intention of the morning is to enable us to learn more about human sexuality and to uphold traditional biblical teaching on sexual morality.”

³ Michael Ignatieff, 1999: introduction

Which, as you can imagine, I queried – not a lot of point in me going all the way to the North if the outcome of the day was already decided! And got a satisfactory response, and am going to speak there next March. But my goodness, it winds me up; this notion that biblical teaching speaks with one voice on the question of sexual morality – more, that biblical teaching speaks with one voice on any question of morality and ethics at all! Even the familiar parable of the talents we heard on Sunday encourages people, if they do nothing else with their talent, to leave it with the bankers – which flies in the face of the prohibitions of usury.

The gospel. What is the gospel? What do we mean by the word gospel? Which of the gospels are we seeking to engage with? The gospel of Matthew, with its profound concern for continuity and the law – or the gospel of John, innovating furiously, borderline gnostic, imbued with Greek philosophy - or Mark, sharp and to the point - or Luke, with its concern for the poor and the marginalized, the outsiders and outcasts.... Which gospel?

None of the above, of course. What do they do? What are the purpose of the gospels? Oi Evangelioi? The Good News. Their purpose is to bear witness to Jesus Christ. To Jesus Christ, the extraordinary, incommensurable, indescribably indefinable human being caught up into divinity in some way as yet unexplained.... To Jesus Christ, who is, it seems, all in all, all things for all people, reaching out beyond Godself to bring in the outcast and the excluded, to give strength to the weary, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to declare the year of the Lord's favour -

So who is Jesus Christ? The one who looks through the presenting person to the truth underneath, the truth which is equally true for all people – that we are all made, beautiful, in the image of God. I'm very

taken, at the moment, with the way in which Jesus seems to have had the ability to become, instinctively and directly, part of people's lives. The way in which he managed to understand absolutely what someone might need – which, in the end, in so many cases, was love. Take, for example, Zaccheus – one of my favourites – ostracized and rich - come down, Zaccheus, for I'm coming to your house for tea. Jesus Christ is, as is so eloquently shown in Jeffrey John's book *The Meaning of the Miracles*, the inclusive one.

So if we are to be true both to our tradition and our gospel, we are presented with a number of imperatives. We must challenge the tradition. We must understand the nature of Jesus Christ, the instantiation of love on earth. And we must try to live out that nature in the world. And if we do this, we may be able to help the church live out its nature, overcome its fear, and allow it to express those biblical values which are at the heart of our faith; the values of welcome, love and transformation – which is the inevitable consequence of forgiveness.

I want to offer a way of doing this which has come to me recently – in fact it came to me last week as I was thinking about Remembrance Sunday. I'd been speaking with Georgie Heskins –who's here – about her trip to visit the Sant'Egidio Community in Rome. (Explain St Egidio) – The Sant'Egidio Community prioritise, above all things, friendship. Friendship with the poor, and friendship amongst themselves.

Of course friendship is what's at the heart of the gospel. I no longer call you servants but friends, because I have told you all that the father is doing. John 15.15. I no longer call you servants but friends. Who did Jesus have around him?



A motley crew of mates, men and women, slaves and free, different classes, nationalities, and, one assumes, sexualities.... Friends. People who he saw, understood, and welcomed, whose hearts responded to his heart, cora ad coram, people who were both inspired by and inspired him.

Out of that came a phrase I'm playing with at the moment; and the phrase is Radical Friendship.

Radical friendship. What do I mean by that?

I mean something which is intentional, which is mutual, which is challenging and which takes us into new and as yet unknown areas. Modelled, perhaps, on the friendships which are such an important part of the Gospel narrative. Friendships which break barriers of class, ethnicity, wealth, ability or gender. And in so doing create a new world not defined by those barriers, but defined by something different; defined by love, and respect, and welcome, and inclusion.

The notion of friendship is a good one, I think. It's dynamic, and it changes things. One good thing which has come out of the progressive activism in the church – working for the inclusion of us lot in all our breadth and diversity – has been growing friendship between groups - between WATCH and IC and Changing Attitude and the Association of Black Clergy, which has at times been challenging but also very creative.

And in my own life, some profound friendships have emerged, especially through church, which have changed us both. My last congregation was half Nigerian; my present congregation is half Ugandan. Both quite conservative, you might think. But I have so often been touched by the quiet affirmation which goes both ways, the gentle acknowledgement of our shared humanity which brings light and courage to the world we share.

I spent a weekend in Northern Ireland recently, in Belfast, and I found the visit really quite profoundly shocking. Why? Because, I discovered, despite the Peace Process the divisions between Catholic and Protestant are still as deep and as unbridged as ever. There is, through the middle of Belfast, a 3 1/2 mile wall to keep the communities apart. And the idea of friendship, certainly between the poorer communities, seems to be completely unimaginable.



The Sant' Egidio community think that Northern Europe is much too project based – much too much about outputs and outcomes - and maybe they've got a point. I wonder whether one way to assist the church in its struggling with the questions which challenge it is to model this notion of radical friendship – across boundaries, across barriers, with those we don't agree with, with those we hardly know. Maybe the whole church needs to take on the notion of radical friendship as a

paradigm.

So I offer the idea to this conference; perhaps over the next few days we can imagine ourselves into the relationships implied by radical friendship and see where they lead us. You never know, we might even be transformed, and who knows where that might lead?

It sometimes seems as though hope is scant in this world, and it's hard to believe that the church will ever be different. So I want to end on a note of hope and encouragement, for all of us.

I have a friend who did an MA last year in the the Sociology and Anthropology of Religion at King's. For his dissertation he studied the LGBT AC (define). I won't rehearse the whole thing; but I want to tell you his conclusion, because it has implications for all of us.

Coming at the C of E as a sociologist is interesting; it gives you a different take. Oh, and he's Muslim as well. He sees the C of E as a social movement network. By which he means that it, as an organism, is made up of lots of different social movements – movements linked by particular interest, in, say, the Book of Common Prayer or ecology – all combined into one big maelstrom of interests which is called the C of E. And right there, at the heart of it, are the women's networks and the LGBT networks. His conclusion, specifically about LGBT Anglicans but also about women in the church, is that simply be being here, being strong, and being ourselves, we are forcing the Church to redefine itself. To quote –

“My findings show that the Church of England can be seen as a „social movement institution“ – its formal and informal dynamics have enabled a variety of Church „social movements“ to emerge within the past century or so. Some of these movements managed to redefine the

Church’s official policies, for example in the ordination of women....Within this framework the LGBT Anglican Coalition, through its existence and actions as an institutionalised movement, is directly influencing the debate at various levels.”

There’s a lot to do; there’s a long way to go. But I am quite sure that if we approach it in the right way; if we celebrate radical friendship; if we stand, confidently, and say that we, as Christians, have to be included – that the inclusive imperative applies to everyone – then I am quite sure that we will be able to make the difference. To be the change.

I started by asking a question – are you a Mince Pie Christian or a Cup Cake Christian. Are you a traditionalist or an innovator. But the wonderful thing about the question is that if you google Mince Pie and Cup Cake, you come up with a lovely recipe for a radically new and yet deeply traditional recipe.



A mince pie cup cake.

That’s the sort of Christian I am; why should it be either/or when it can be both/and? Why should it be exclusive when it should be inclusive? And why should it be about fear when it could be about love?

