

Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane

The Heartlands of Anglicanism

10 July 2006

The Archbishop of Cape Town has written to the Primates of the Anglican Communion issuing a strong call to uphold the 'broad rich heartlands of our Anglican heritage.' He argues that this must be 'the territory on which we debate our future.' He adds 'it is not something to be fought out at the limits of conservatism or liberalism, as if they were the only possibilities before us.'

In a lengthy reflection on what it is to be Anglican, Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane declares, 'we cannot lose this middle ground.' He argues that the central core of Anglican tradition is not bland or shallow, but offers 'productive spiritual soil.' He refutes any suggestion that embracing the middle ground means 'anything goes.' Rather, he affirms uncompromising dedication and obedience to the heart of faith, as it is lived under the authority of Scripture, of Church order and structures, and of Christian tradition.

His call follows the recent 'profound and stimulating reflections' by the Archbishop of Canterbury, 'The Challenge and Hope of Being an Anglican Today.' In responding, the Archbishop of Cape Town asks 'What does it mean to be Anglican?' and affirms Archbishop Rowan's description of the fundamental character of Anglicanism as combining the best of both catholic and reformed tradition, which together inform mature engagement with contemporary culture. He contends that any authentic solution to current differences within the Anglican Communion must preserve these strengths.

He also argues that the best means of finding such a solution is to proceed in a characteristically Anglican way: in a spirit of tolerance, trust and charity, and through the existing structures of the Communion. Acknowledging that these have evolved over time to serve changing needs, he now calls for their 'renewal, transformation and revision' rather than 'radical replacement,' so as to preserve their strengths. He points out that legal authority rests with the synodical processes of Provinces, and calls for fuller engagement of clergy and laity in the current debate, which he says will inevitably be lengthy.

Archbishop Ndungane speaks of 'creative and dynamic diversity' within his own personal faith, as well as at every level of Anglicanism. He illustrates this by reflecting on experiences within Southern Africa, from which he also demonstrates that decisions to exist separately can leave a lasting and difficult legacy.

He offers a fresh understanding of what it means to live within tradition, not seeing it as 'dry history' but rather as 'holy remembering' through which we 'find our place of participation within the unfolding narrative of God's redeeming acts.'

The Archbishop does not propose specific solutions. Instead, he writes that his intention is to help Anglicans be faithful to what God has done in the past, and so preserve and pass on the best of that heritage – and that he believes that holding on to the middle ground, the Heartlands of Anglicanism, is the best way of achieving this.

The full text of the Archbishop's reflection follows:

Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane

The Heartlands of Anglicanism

What does it mean to be Anglican? What is it about Anglicanism that has led so many to conclude that it provides the most productive spiritual soil for living out the Christian faith? What is it that we have, which we dare not lose?

These questions lead us to the heart of the Archbishop of Canterbury's profound and stimulating reflections, 'The Challenge and Hope of Being an Anglican Today.' We need to be confident in our response if we want to find good answers to the other questions we face about the nature of the shared life of the Anglican Communion.

Archbishop Rowan offers his own description of our distinctive Christian inheritance. This he depicts as having the three strands of 'reformed commitment to the absolute priority of the Bible for deciding doctrine, a catholic loyalty to the sacraments and the threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons, and a habit of cultural sensitivity and intellectual flexibility that does not seek to close down unexpected questions too quickly.'

It is indeed within the territory encompassed by these strands that I find my own experience and understanding of Christianity. These describe the rich heartlands of Anglicanism – the solid centre, focussed on Jesus Christ, to which we are constantly drawn back by the counterbalancing pull of the other strands, if any one threatens to become disproportionately influential.

These Anglican heartlands are the subject of my reflections – the historic fertile middle ground, which is in danger of being forgotten amid polarising arguments and talk of schism.

I am not offering specific solutions to the predicament we face, even as I recognise that changes are inevitable. Rather I want to underline and affirm that the territory on which we debate our future can only be that of these broad rich heartlands of our Anglican heritage. It is not something to be fought out at the limits of conservatism or liberalism, as if they were the only possibilities before us.

Furthermore, the means by which we engage in deliberations and pursue our solutions must also be those of our Anglican heritage – discernment sought through the God-given, God-graced virtues of trust, tolerance and charity across the variety we encompass; and through following the due processes of our structures. We must honour our inheritance as both episcopally led and synodically governed. The role of the historic episcopate as a focus of unity is vital, while at the same time we are not a church constituted in its bishops alone. Therefore clergy and laity, the whole people of God, must be included in wide debate, alongside the deliberation of Primates and Bishops at Lambeth.

To be enabled to do this, we must better engage with Anglican Tradition. We need a fresh understanding of tradition not as dry forensic history, but as holy remembering of God's abiding with his people, through the centuries. We must own our history – the living and life-giving history of God at work among us – in order to find our place of participation within the unfolding narrative of God's redeeming acts in and through his church.

This is the heart of Anglicanism. We must not lose this middle ground.

Middle Ground – the Heartlands of Anglicanism

At its best, our living faith draws on the strengths of all three threads of what Archbishop Rowan describes as our reformed, catholic and intellectual/cultural components. It is not that we draw singly on one or another, as we find it most appropriate to some particular situation. Rather, in all circumstances we find a richly-textured, maturing faith flourishes as we allow God to meet us through the creative interplay of insights, encouragements, challenges, even admonitions, from all three elements taken together.

Anglicanism is not a tradition that has operated through binary polarities and sharp distinctions - this versus that, in versus out, us versus them. Rather, Scriptures, creeds and historic formularies, together with the ordered sacramental life of worship, and with careful, prayerful reflection, provide the magnet that continually draws us toward the centre – one baptism, one church, one faith, and most of all one Lord 'in whom all things hold together' (Cor 1:17).

It is because Jesus Christ, second person of the Trinity made flesh, is our goal, our end, our *telos*, the central focus and direction of our lives, that Anglicanism has found through the ages that we can afford to live with messiness, ambiguity and anomaly at the edges. Through that permeability many have found a warm invitation to come closer, and so to recognise and accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

Let no-one imagine that to speak of this Anglican middle ground implies a bland and mediocre faith. By no means! This is no shallow, casual approach.

The greatest Anglicans of past and present are characterised by radical holiness of life, an uncompromising dedication to prayer and Bible study, and tenacious pursuit of the truth as they wrestled with the issues of their day. This is a life lived under the authority of all these three-fold strands of faith: of Scripture, of Church order and structures, of Christian tradition. It is the life of obedience and self-discipline, and often costly self-denial, for, especially in our relations with one another, as Paul reminds the Corinthian church, even where 'all things are lawful,' it may well be that 'not all things are beneficial' (1 Cor 10:23). All of us would do well to remember this.

Nor does accepting the inevitability of messiness at the margins of the community of faith mean 'anything goes.'

We are all permanently under the three-fold testing and purifying scrutiny of the refining fire of God's holiness (Zech 13:9), of the two-edged sword of Scripture (Heb 4:12), of minds transformed by the renewing Spirit (Rom 12:2) – constantly challenged by truth and invited by love to 'hate what is evil and cling to what is good' (Rom 12:9) and so to move towards greater Christ-likeness.

It is on this basis we dare to engage with the complexities of contemporary life around us.

The catholicity that saves us from narrowness and introspection is, as the Archbishop of Canterbury reminds us, fundamental to our foundations. We are a sacramental community, living out our faith in theological and institutional continuity, conscious of being part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church that is united with Christ, the vehicle of his mission in the world.

Sometimes we speak of the need to 'baptize culture.' This is no cursory wipe with a damp cloth to produce a superficial religious veneer. Baptism is the radical transformation that comes through burial with Christ and being raised with him – every culture must die to the priorities, the loyalties, the idols, of this world, and find new, authentic, life-giving, contemporary expression, transfigured under the lordship of Jesus, Saviour and Redeemer.

When confronted with such narrowly drawn choices as 'Are you liberal, or conservative?' my response is that these are not the categories through which I live as a child of God, and a member of the body of Christ, though I recognise both conservative convictions and liberal instincts within myself, as I do also catholic commitment, not least to the Divine Office and the Eucharist. Rather, I know that I must engage with the Lord more broadly, in every dimension of my humanity – with all my heart, mind, soul and strength – and in every way that he reaches out to meet me, if I am really to mature in faith.

I need the full breadth of all three strands, all three dimensions, of faith.

I need the vibrancy of a living relationship with him, which comes cloaked in mystery beyond my comprehension, and is fed through the sacraments and the ordered life and worship of the Church, as well as through private prayer and contemplation; I need the inspired written word of Scripture – with its unique authority, to 'teach, reprove, correct and train in righteousness', all of which I require, if I am to become in any way 'proficient, equipped for every good work' (2 Tim 3:16). And I need to engage with the circumstances and culture in which I find myself – to discern what reflects God's kingdom, to discern where the gospel good news is required to bring sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed, and so to be fully part of God's mission to his world.

None of these are independent of the other two.

Scripture helps me understand and enunciate my relationship with God. His Spirit mysteriously at work in me turns Bible study from dry intellectualism to living encounter. The sacrament of his Body and Blood nourishes me, and gives me strength for life's journey. The institutional life and structures of the Church anchor me and provide a framework for active faith. The challenges of the world drive me to my knees, and more deeply into the pages of Scripture, which then together fuel and give shape to my intellectual wrestling.

In different times and places, the emphasis may lie more with one thread than with another – there is a creative and dynamic diversity even at the heart of my own faith – just as there is the creative and dynamic diversity within the unity of the God-head who is also distinctly Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Here I should like wholeheartedly to endorse Archbishop Rowan's understanding of the interrelationship of unity and truth. Jesus is the Truth, and our unity is in him. Both start and end with him – they are both gifts, and both 'prior' to us and our choices, and to a very great degree, unity is indeed 'generally a way of coming closer to revealed truth.' If the body is not whole, the whole body suffers, including our understanding of the truth. Both unity and truth must be pursued together to the best of our God-graced ability – neither is optional within our Christian vocation. And both lead to Jesus.

I find this endless returning to Christ, to the centre, to the middle ground, a continuing dominant reality not just in my personal faith. I also find it in my own experience and

understanding of the Anglican Church, in all its diversity, at every level, from Communion, and Primates meetings and Lambeth conferences, through to Provinces, Dioceses, parishes. We grow best when we have that level of complimentary difference which can indeed 'provoke one another to love and to good deeds' (Heb 10:24).

It is not easy to live with a spectrum of perspectives – it is challenging even when we are fully confident we are all firmly within the Anglican heartlands. But this wrestling together offers us the possibility of treasures that cannot be found in more monochrome approaches to faith.

We need people, even communities and Provinces, who are deeply immersed in each of these streams, catholic, reformed and intellectual/cultural, so we can together forge a fuller understanding of how to live faithfully in our current times. The continuous rebalancing interaction within this approach characterises the best of Christian tradition throughout the last two millennia – for we are a church that is built on the prophets and the apostles, from the time of Peter and Paul onwards. This is the tradition in which we stand.

Tradition – Holy Remembering

It is important that we know Anglicans mean when we speak of Tradition – which, since the seventeenth and eighteenth century divines, we have considered our touchstone alongside Scripture and Reason. This is not as clear as it might be in the Windsor Report.

First, let me say what it is not. Tradition is not a dispassionate history of institutional life, the dry and dusty account of some external observer. If that were the case, it would be hard to see why we should pay tradition more than limited attention.

No. Tradition is holy remembering – remembering as Scripture teaches us to remember. 'Remember how the Lord brought you out of Egypt' is God's word to future generations in the Promised Land. 'Do this in remembrance of me' are Jesus' words to us, as we meet Sunday by Sunday, breaking bread and sharing wine, and finding ourselves joined with him and all that he has won for us through his one self-giving sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Holy remembering is far more than casting our mind across a widening gulf of years. Holy remembering is both to recall and to participate. It is to be caught up into the unfolding narrative of God's involvement with his people in every time and place. It is to recognise God at work in our church throughout the centuries, and to know ourselves in living continuity with his faithful people in every age. To remember is to take our place within God's story of redemption.

Understanding tradition as the invitation to live in continuity with God's actions through his church shapes our understanding of the task before us now. It challenges us to see the fingerprints of God upon our history, and to ensure that we too can say that 'what we have received from the Lord, we have passed on' (cf 1 Cor 11:23).

This is why catholicity is an intrinsic part of Anglican self-understanding. This is why we have to go forward in a way that preserves the best of Anglicanism as today's foundation for tomorrow. We cannot be content to remedy our current disagreements with a quick fix, nor allow the diminishing of the broad and rich resources that have fed our own Anglicanism, and truly provide the coherent core of our faith.

Tradition: God's Grace in Anglican Structures

We should acknowledge the great extent to which our current structures, even if not perfect, have been richly used by God, and have well served the spiritual life and ministry of the church.

The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral has been an invaluable touchstone to our common life, and our life in relation to others, pointing to the centrality of Scripture, Creeds, Biblical Sacraments and Historic Episcopate, in our life, our ecclesiology, our theology and our spirituality. The Instruments of Unity have evolved and developed over time, shaped to address and serve the needs of the Communion. Further renewal, transformation and revision should be our starting point rather than turning to radical replacement, if we are not to lose their strengths in our attempts to overcome their weaknesses.

Similarly, the degree of autonomy we enjoy in our Provinces has allowed hugely productive expressions of mature Christian faith appropriate to our regions of the world, and from which others have then learnt. As we are a church that is both episcopally led and synodically governed, they also provide effectively for full participation of clergy and laity alongside the episcopacy in deliberating and decision-making.

Thus it is the Provinces that have the final say – through their constitutional processes and the deliberations of their synods. This is ultimately where the future of Anglicanism lies – this is where the authority to take decisions is found. We should be entirely clear about this – no matter what certain groups, or the media say. Anglicans should not be daunted when the press makes much of this group's statement or that group's communiqué, as many do not carry substantive authority.

Rather, we should encourage the whole people of God to contribute to forging our future together. The Primates' meeting next year, and the Lambeth Conference in 2008, must take extensive counsel, but, as is well known, these are not authoritative decision making bodies. And, as gatherings solely of Bishops, they are certainly not representative of all the fullness of Anglicanism. Bishops must exercise collegiality with their clergy and people, as well as with one another.

Therefore, as both the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Joint Standing Committee of the Primates (in the document, Towards an Anglican Covenant) have pointed out, this means that we have a lengthy process before us. It cannot be 'solved' in the next year or two – and to attempt to do so would be dishonouring both to the Windsor Process, and, more importantly, to the people of God who count themselves Anglican.

I also hope we will abide by our tradition and our structures – and the recommendations of the Windsor Report – when it comes to observing the integrity of one another's Provinces, Dioceses and Parishes. It is one thing to say, as the Archbishop of Canterbury does, that our present structures are not adequately developed to cope with the diversity of views that inevitably arise in our contemporary life. It is quite another to ride roughshod over them, even as we seek ways of improving them.

Comparable considerations apply to the respect owing to the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury, which, as has been shown at many times in the past, encompasses far more than merely the person holding office at any one time.

Tradition: God's Grace in Anglican Style

There are other hallmarks of the way of being Anglican, certain styles of relating to each other that reflect the gift of God's grace. I find these characterised particularly by tolerance, trust and charity, as we have lived out our diversity.

First comes **tolerance**. This flows from the way we define ourselves through the strong centre of Scripture, the creeds, the councils and other historic formularies, rather than by boundaries; and from our repeated experience that God, ultimately, will deal with the 'mess at the margins.' (And let me repeat – this is certainly not accepting 'anything goes.') Anglicanism is in this way a vibrant commitment to the teachings of Jesus' parable about the enemy who sows weeds in the wheat-field. We do not live by attempting to uproot each potential weed at the earliest possible moment – we know that this risks ruining the rest of the crop (Matt 13:24-30).

Looking back over the centuries, there is plentiful evidence that through exercising considerable tolerance – sometimes more than others have thought tolerable – Anglicanism has survived and held together. Holy remembering tells us this is God's way for us, and therefore gives us confidence that the Lord will continue to see us through.

Then there is **trust**. We must believe that we are each acting in good faith. No one is deliberately setting out to disobey God. We are all sincere in trying to follow what is right – upholding truth, pursuing justice. We must recognise as brothers and sisters in Christ those who call on Jesus as their Lord. We may think they are wrong on various issues, but that is different from doubting their sincerity, the validity of their faith or their membership of the body of Christ.

As Paul tells the Corinthians, we know there is vast diversity within Christ's body – so vast it is likely to stretch our understanding of legitimate faith to the limit, just as seeing is incomprehensible to the ear, or hearing to the eye (cf 1 Cor 12:14ff). It is God alone who decides who is a member of Christ's body, among those who claim to follow him. We must wrestle with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, encouraging one another in pursuit of the truth; and if any of us are misguided in our sincerity, we too can trust Gamaliel's words to the Sanhedrin: 'If this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow [it]' (Acts 5:38,39).

A related God-gifted virtue is the spirit of **charity**. Paul, to the Corinthians again, tells us this is patient, kind, not insisting on its own way, not irritable, nor resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (cf 1 Cor 13:4ff).

Such charity oils the wheels of the continual attentiveness to each other that is intrinsic to relationship within the body of Christ. This is the listening that is not just done with our ears, but with our hearts, and on our knees. This charity, this love, is one of the gifts of the Spirit, and just as we have seen it often in the past, so we should strive to live within its ambit in our current differences.

God's gifts of tolerance, trust and charity have provided grace for that other aspect of Anglican style – the diversity found not least within our church walls on Sunday mornings.

Our liturgical wealth, historically rooted yet finding contemporary, contextual, expression, provides scope for the full celebration of word and sacrament in our worshipping life. High

church, evangelical, charismatic, and more – each bring their own particular riches, while all resonate with something undeniably Anglican. Whether it is awe and adoration, gospel proclamation, faith re-energised, encultured expression – there is room for all and there is need for all. Of course, each tradition may draw strength from the others, and that is good – but we need them to flourish as they are, overflowing with heavenly grace into our common life. We do not need some lowest-common denominator compromise, but the full glorious panoply that God, who is both One and Three, grants through his richly diverse creativity.

Anglican Tradition – Holy Remembering in Southern Africa

The history of Southern Africa and of the Church in this part of the continent offer us powerful insights, both into the strength of the Anglican heritage, and into the problems we may cause ourselves when walking apart seems the only option.

First, the good news. We have lived through centuries of colonialism and over four decades of legalised racism. By God's grace we avoided the blood-bath many predicted would ensue, and instead now enjoy one of the most enlightened constitutions in the world.

The broad inheritance of Anglicanism has helped us face all this with confidence – and the three-fold threads of our tradition can be seen in our experience. Spirit-led cultural critique has directed our search for authentic, African, expressions of faith, unmasking the trappings of colonial practices and teachings, while leaving the core of belief intact. So too, the Anglican church was able to play a leading role in opposing apartheid, countering both those who tried to defend it from Scripture and others who argued that political engagement was unspiritual. South Africa's ability to embrace the possibilities of forgiveness, and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (chaired and guided, of course, by Anglican Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu), were grounded in principles of restorative justice that are wholly gospel shaped. It was engaging reformed, catholic and cultural/intellectual components together which gave us this comprehensive strength.

We were also enabled to hold together within the Anglican Church, knowing we stood in firm agreement on the heart of faith, when we held differing views even on such major issues as how to oppose apartheid, the armed struggle and sanctions. Today, there is not full accord on the ministry of women – but never the suggestion that this might be a church-dividing issue.

However, another, less happy, Southern African Anglican distinctive is the way that the fall-out of differences within Anglicanism, rooted in the nineteenth century, still remain on our agenda. This makes me very wary of solutions that prescribe separation or some weakening of the ties that bind us. Our long experience shows that this does not make problems 'go away' but leaves a lasting and often little less difficult legacy. Let me mention some examples.

In 1866, Bishop Colenso of Natal was excommunicated after lengthy dissent with Bishop Gray of Cape Town across a wide range of issues. (Indeed, the first Lambeth conference was convened largely as a result of this dispute.) In 1985 our Provincial Synod recognised and affirmed his 'courageous leadership ... in the areas of pioneering biblical scholarship, cross-cultural mission and the pursuit of social justice.' Today the Synod of Bishops is still

exploring how we can appropriately acknowledge the fruits of Colenso's ministry in the life of our Province. Almost one and a half centuries later, the issue is still with us.

There are other anomalies of Anglican history with which we are still faced, particularly the Church of England in South Africa, and the Ethiopian Episcopal Church. Then there is the parish of Wynberg, which predates Bishop Gray's arrival, and has an autonomous status within the Diocese of Cape Town, and with which, more happily, we now have an ever closer relationship.

My point in listing these is to say that separation brings its own complications, which re-echo down subsequent centuries. All these current 'cousin' relationships have roots over a century old, and the anomalies they bring are likely to remain with us for the foreseeable future. We are forced to ask whether it would have been better if those concerned had worked harder at holding together.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us take heart from Peter's words in his second letter, 'Do not ignore this one fact beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.' (2 Pet 3:8,9)

So we should be in no hurry to find quick solutions tailored to addressing our current problems. We rather need to take thorough care in discerning answers that lie fully within the tradition that we have received, so that we too may pass on the great riches of our Anglican heritage. To do this requires methodical and comprehensive exploration of all that is in the Windsor Report, and in Archbishop Rowan's reflections. I see them as significant foundation stones of the future we are trying to build.

We will find authentic Anglican answers if we conduct our debate within the fertile territory of the rich Anglican heartlands, engaging with one another in a godly spirit of tolerance, trust and charity, and having confidence in the living tradition of our Anglican structures, as part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, through which the Lord has preserved us, guided us and led us, so mercifully in the past.

God has given us so much – let us be faithful to him, and to those who will come after us, by preserving and passing on the rich essentials of his gift.

Let us stand firm upon the middle ground.

Cape Town, 10 July 2006