

Staying and Fighting our Corner

a Sermon preached by the Rev'd Dr Peter Mullen
at St Michael's Cornhill
on the twentieth Sunday after Trinity 2009
in reply to a recent statement by the Roman Catholic Church

Pope Benedict surprised the Archbishop of Canterbury last week by making an audacious and generous offer to traditional Anglicans. He is offering us full communion with Rome while agreeing that we may retain our traditional Church of England forms of worship, our King James Bible and Book of Common Prayer. Even Anglican priests who are married will be made welcome. This morning I should like to tell you what I aim to do, but first it is necessary to outline the background to this sensational development.

We have to go back to the 1950s. In that decade the Church of England was, like the rest of the country, enjoying the post-war boom. Church attendances were up. So were Christenings and weddings. Vocations to the priesthood likewise. In the working-class Leeds parish where I grew up, there were three of us offering ourselves for ordination. There were three parties in the Church of England: High, Low and Broad. The one thing they held in common was that they all worshipped using the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. It was a blissful time to be a member of the church, and to be young was very heaven.

Then came the 1960s and everything changed. First, there was the theological revolution. Bishop John Robinson wrote his iconoclastic bestseller *Honest to God* which he advertised in *The Observer* newspaper by saying, *Our image of God must go*. In chapter six of this book he also derided the traditional morality of the Ten Commandments and argued instead for something he called *situation ethics* which meant making moral decisions on the hoof according to the principle of love. This quickly became known as *the new morality*—just as quickly described by traditionalists as *the old immorality in a miniskirt*. It really amounted to doing what you liked. Of course it suited the swinging sixties—*let it all hang out*—generation very well and chimed nicely with the Beatles' song *All you need is Love*.

But Robinson was only the start of it. There followed books of radical theology which went way beyond *Honest to God*. There was Paul van Buren's *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* and Thomas J. J. Altizer's *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*. A group of British theologians published a title *Objections to Christian Belief*. The mood had changed suddenly from the confident faith of the 1950s to the widespread feeling that the cat was out of the bag and that no truly modern person, in the age of satirical television programmes, the lifting of the *Lady Chatterley* ban, the pill, sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll could be a traditional Christian believer. As the conservative poet Philip Larkin put it ruefully:

*Sexual intercourse began in 1963 (which was rather late for me)
Between the end of the Chatterley ban and the Beatles first LP.*

Close on the theological revolution came the liturgical innovations. The King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer were sidelined and replaced—some of you may remember—at first by the booklets *Series One, Two and Three* and then by the clapped-out, tin-eared doggerel of the *Alternative Service Book 1980*. The radical bishops and synod described the publication of the *ASB* in 1980 as *the greatest publishing event in 400 years*. Twenty years later, the same

hierarchy, Hitler-style, actually banned the *ASB* and gave us instead the even worse book *Common Worship*. Even this excrescence is barely relevant today as many parsons download any liturgical trash they happen to fancy and print out ephemeral service sheets. One result of all this is that no one under fifty now knows any prayers by heart.

What has actually happened over these last forty years is that the church has embraced the secular agenda: the so-called *progressive* sexual and social policies, feminism, anti-sexism, anti-racism, idealistic internationalism and the dogma of universal human rights. The Church of England effectually resigned. As T. E. Hulme said, *No institution is ever defeated until it is penetrated by the ideas of its enemies*. The church has been so penetrated. We have imbibed the notions and policies of the secularists whose consistently declared aim is the obliteration of Christianity from public life.

One interesting sidelight on all this is that the modernising bishops of the 1960s and 70s were engaged in enthusiastic negotiations for unity with Rome. But when it became a choice between that unity and ordaining women to the priesthood, feminism triumphed over ecumenism and the so-earnest, so-sincere, talks with Rome were at an end. This was the key moment in the secularisation of the Church of England.

Our church is now governed by the theological and liturgical iconoclasts, by people who, in the traditional sense, are really unbelieving: feminised multiculturalists who see the Christianity they promised at their appointment to defend as an impediment to that supposed wider understanding based on the contradictory alliance between world religions and secular humanism. Any traditionalist in today's dumbed-down, traduced, secular and faithless church will be persecuted by the apostate hierarchy which now rules us.

It is against this background then that we must understand the Pope's offer. He is opening his doors to disaffected traditional Anglicans and saying, in effect, *Look, here you can return to a believing church, to a church which has not overturned its own doctrines nor adopted the secular moral and social orthodoxies*. What will be the outcome of this extraordinary gesture? It is widely reported that perhaps 1000 traditional priests will leave, many taking their parishioners with them. No wonder the Archdruid of Canterbury has been going around with a face like a wet week. For be ye well assured, the powers of the bishops have been shaken and the modernising Synod is brought low.

Friends and colleagues are urging me to take up the Pope's offer and, at a stroke, relieve myself of the burden of having to accept the authority of modernised ecclesiastical superiors with whom I do not have a single thing in common. Moreover, they tell me, these friends and colleagues, that, if I do take up the Pope's offer, I shall be able to avail myself once again of all the traditional forms and doctrines in which I was brought up, to which I was ordained priest thirty-nine years ago and which I love. So what shall I do?

The Pope is offering me all those beautiful and sacred teachings, unsullied by the poisonous deposits of modernised, debunked Anglicanism. Isn't this just what I crave? Shouldn't I be grateful to the Holy Father and accept his generous hospitality without further delay? I would surely then be escaped from the sheer nastiness of the modern bishops and the creepy non-believing political clique which runs the General Synod.

When all these good things are offered to me by the Bishop of Rome, I hope I do not sound ungracious when I reply, *But I have these things already*. I believe that I was validly ordained. Whatever the hierarchy of the collapsed Church of England commands, I can refuse. I have the Scriptures, the King James Bible, the Prayer Book, the Sacraments. I have the ancient creeds. I have the glorious teachings of St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, St Anselm. I actually don't

spend a moment of my time attending to the pronouncements and outpourings of the secularised and failed modern Church of England. I study our ancient and traditional sources. I luxuriate in the superior richness of the great Anglican divines: Donne, Hooker, Lancelot Andrewes, William Law. And the outstanding Christian men of letters who formed our English life and literature: Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, T. S. Eliot, C. H. Sisson. I worship to the music of Tallis, Palestrina, Byrd, Victoria, Mozart, Haydn and Vaughan Williams. I am by no means deprived. Of course I do this knowing that to our debased hierarchy all this stuff is only so much elitism and irrelevance. Well, by their fruits ye shall know them. And I know that we are better sustained by those superb English Christians than by the crowd of illiterates among the modern bishops and in the synod.

Still it is not comfortable being a traditionalist serving under the ignorant, vicious modern authorities. But I'm not in it for comfort. I don't shirk a fight. Half my life has been spent in vigorous opposition to the begetters of our current decadence since 1980 when I edited with David Martin the book *No Alternative* against *The Alternative Service Book*. And I am not fighting some solitary battle. I have you, my people—an informed, devout and affectionate congregation. When C. H. Sisson was faced with the problem of what traditionalists ought to do. He said:

What then is the position of the theological rump in our now lay, secularised clerisy? There are three possibilities. They can stay and fight their corner, struggling for an intelligibility which might come again, and will come, if it is the truth they are concerned with. They can sit on pillars in some recess of the national structure, waiting for better times. Or they can let their taste for having an ecclesiastical club carry them into one or other of those international gangs of opinion—that which has its headquarters in Rome or that which has a shadowy international meeting-place in Canterbury. In any case it will be a political choice that is being made. For my part, I shall prefer those who stay and fight their corner, content to be merely the Church in a place.

That is my position too. I will stay and fight my corner. St Michael's is the Church in this place.

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