

SERMON FOR TRINITY 8 | 07.08.22

Nehemiah 8: 1-17; Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16; St Luke 12: 32-40

It is often said that the only history our children ever learn about in school is centred on two men – Henry VIII and Adolf Hitler! Not the greatest role models in the world! Today, as we pray for the work of the Anglican bishops from all over the world, gathered in Canterbury for the Lambeth Conference, I hope you will forgive me if I throw in some Church history too as we try to see the context for what is taking place. I wish I were able to use the data projector for this bit I am afraid my eyes simply couldn't cope with getting the images together for you.

If I may I want to start with a bit of an explanation of how we even have what we call 'the Anglican Communion', this loose federation of independent national churches spread - somewhat unevenly - over every continent in the world. And I use the word 'unevenly' for one very obvious reason: Anglicanism has spread around the globe largely because of the rise of the British ability as a seafaring nation to make money by trading wherever a boat could sail. But of course we weren't the first. In the 1500s the Spanish and Portuguese were sailing all over the Americas and the South China seas, quickly followed by the Dutch. But after the 30 years war on the Continent had ended in the mid 1650s, all the great European powers were building merchant fleets to bring home the goods that the more affluent societies in Europe were demanding, and latterly that included the British and the French. And where trading posts were established so troops moved in too, to enlarge the prestige of the monarch and to secure those trading routes on a more permanent basis.

In the wake of the Spanish and Portuguese armies came the great Roman Catholic religious orders – the Franciscans and the Jesuits - who brought in huge numbers of men to preach and baptise the indigenous populations now under military rule. Just watch 'The Mission' if you want a taste of what the Spanish were able to do as they exploited the gold and silver mines of Mexico and elsewhere. In time they built those hugely elaborate churches and cathedrals in exactly the same style as those found in Spain.

As – in simpler form - the Anglicans did, which is why you will find English Gothic Cathedrals in Mumbai and Sydney, Rangoon, Dar es Salaam, Port Moresby and Lagos – indeed anywhere where British entrepreneurs established permanent trading links.

But we didn't have the great RC religious orders to carry out this missionary endeavour. It was largely done by very small-scale groups of clergy who formed mission societies, leaving their ministries in England to take the Gospel 'to heathen lands' as one of their hymns famously said. It is hard for us to imagine groups of public school educated young priests just sailing off into horizon with little more than Bible and an umbrella, to take the Gospel from Ghana to the south Pacific.

And the tasks before them were formidable but the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and the Church Mission Society, one more Catholic and one more Evangelical, not only learned the local languages and built churches but went on to found schools and hospitals throughout Africa, Asia, Canada and Australia in quite remarkable ways. Where first the clergy were chaplains to the British administrations (and highly colonial in the very worst sense) they soon became fully identifiable with their local situations in order to thrive.

And what did that mean in practice? Take the CMS mission to Uganda. Once there they found the local Kabaka of Buganda, Mwanga II, had a taste for taking young adolescent boys to bed with him. Over a two year period to January 1887, 22 of these boys who refused his advances, both Anglican and Catholic, were burnt alive. So when, this week, we hear statements from the Anglican primates in Uganda and neighbouring countries, decrying any toleration for homosexual relationships or equal marriage, it is stories like that which are very much in their minds. To that we will return very shortly.

So Lambeth Conferences started to be called from 1867, actually at the request of the bishops in Canada. To start with they were very small - travel was both difficult and expensive - but by the Lambeth Conference of 1930 the bishops had begun to issue statements which sought to define what Anglicanism was about. It was in that year that they passed resolutions condemning racism (in the wake of the situation in the US), condemned abortion but – in the face of papal teaching – permitted the use of artificial contraception as part of responsible parenthood, which got the Anglican primates into very hot water in the Vatican.

But a challenge to a sense of being a united Communion actually came to a head in the Far East, where war time Japanese occupation in the area made it impossible for male priests to offer the sacraments to the Church in Macao.

So, in order to keep the Church alive there but without 'asking permission', Bishop Ronald Hall of Hong Kong managed to reach a deaconess by the name of Florence Tim Oi and she was ordained, the very first woman priest in the Anglican Communion, to answer the demands of war time restrictions. Nevertheless, at the Lambeth Conference of 1948 her license was revoked and it was nearly 30 years later, in 1976, that she was one of the first women priests ordained in Canada.

I have shared these two events – the Uganda Martyrs of 1887 and the ordination of Florence Li Oi in 1944 – because in a sense they reveal not just the two big issues that have dominated these Conferences over the last century - sexuality and women's ordination - but because they also show the remarkable achievement of Archbishop Justin this week.

Because what he has managed to do, in the face of a massive challenge from the African churches, is to avert what might well have been the end of the Anglican Communion. The Archbishop of South Sudan, Justin Badi, had come to Lambeth determined to force a vote condemning all non-heterosexual activity as incompatible with Biblical teaching. He said 75% of Anglicans – who happen to live in Africa – supported his motion because they knew that in their society, the Church would have no credibility if it did not outlaw homosexual relationships. He said that defending gay practices was just an extension of the colonial attitudes of the past – the bringing of 'truth' to the unsophisticated, heathen lands' as taught by the old missionary priests.

But what Justin and this Lambeth Conference have managed to do is to get the evangelical bishops of the Global South to hear – and take on board – just this: that while the *majority* of Anglicans cannot tolerate same sex relationships because of their context and their history, they must understand that in the *minority* of Anglican provinces in the west – America, Canada and those in Europe – the same applies: the Church will have no credibility if it is not open to equal marriage and to the nurture of same-sex relationships. The reading of Scripture depends on where you stand and cannot be treated as proof positive, one way or the other. And there has been a huge lessening of tension as a result.

I believe this is something of a defining moment. While no one likes the idea that these great issues divide us — ultimately the call to stand alongside one another and to see the gift of faith as being of far greater importance than even these great justice, gender and sexuality issues – is a great victory for a humbler and more inclusive form of Anglicanism.