

General Synod Report - Presidential Address

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After the start of play this morning at the General Synod the Archbishop delivered his presidential address. He asserted that there were several different churches of England and that these don't communicate together effectively. He asked what makes these diverse churches one. The Archbishop stated that English Anglicanism is a mosaic of groups many of which claim to be the legitimate and authentic face of Anglicanism. Some believe that the English reformation is incomplete, or has barely begun. They feel that unscriptural principles are controlling much of the territory. Others, he stated, are seeking to be hospitable to anyone who is earnestly seeking spirituality. They argue that we have never been a confessionally bound Church. The depiction of the Church of England in the media is akin to a soap opera. It centres on short-term conflicts with unlikely characters and extraordinary titles and costumes. There is, he said, another Church of England that is hard to pin down. This is the spiritual hinterland for national life and may manifest itself at various important occasions. Many of the intellectual and liberal elite find this Church deeply frustrating when it appears to go against the progressive consensus, indeed they become angry.

The Archbishop said that many in the Church are full of anxiety. They all believe that they have the solutions and yet wonder why they are not winning, indeed why they are not a majority. Everyone ends up believing that they are a persecuted minority, they are in danger of stopping dialogue and retreating. Moreover they all think that their pain is greater than others. He asked what it is that makes us a Church at all? He asserted that it is the call of Christ that makes us a Church and that we must recognise this in others. We have to work at ways of recognising each other as called by the same God and saviour. He stated that the Scriptures provide the first test of this unity and coherence by which all else is to be judged. He also reported a conversation with Peter Jensen when they agreed that Church life should be a matter of verbs not nouns, in effect what God is doing. The Archbishop stated that we are at a watershed. Are we capable of moving towards a more mixed economy – recognising church where it appears.

He went on to speak of some of the things that are going on. The new ways of being Church and the way in which a number of discussions and reports are having

to look at a shift to different styles of ministry. He also drew attention to the way in which people are cavalier about boundaries and about who they work with.

The Archbishop therefore set out a vision for a fuzzy-edged church. It no doubt appeals to many because the different groups within the Church of England cannot apparently co-exist. But is this vision sustainable? Should the Church have absolutely no boundaries? Should we welcome people regardless of what views they have on theological, social or political issues? Even the most liberal of liberals would be indignant at, say, an overtly racist Bishop. More importantly when we look at Scripture and at the history of the Church it is evident that there was a concern for boundaries and that by today's standards these boundaries have often been quite tight. Why therefore should we think that what the Archbishop is proposing is any more than just naïve wishful thinking? It is certainly not a blueprint that has divine authority or even historical precedent, it may be just a recipe for self-destruction.

Furthermore, when Dr Williams says that we must recognise each other as called by God how can this be sufficient? It begs all manner of questions about what he means. It is the case that many in the church are called by God but have not responded to that call. The Church of England holds that there are those in the visible Church who may not be part of the invisible Church. Indeed, in our 39 Articles we affirm that there are those in Synods and Council who are not governed by the Spirit of Christ. To simply assume that everyone who claims to be called by God is in fact a bona-fide Christian, someone who has a real and living faith in Christ and his sacrificial death, is nonsense.

What was good about Dr Williams address was that it was straightforward and not cloaked in verbal nonsense which seems to characterise speeches by liberals and which can be found in abundance in some of his written works. The advantage of straight talking is that it is less open to media misrepresentation and there was a lot of media interest. The disadvantage is that people can soon see that there isn't much substance to what is said.

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