

High, Middle, Low Church and Me

26/3/17

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

There have been interesting discussions between Fr Jim and me over the last month regarding church practice during worship. This is particularly relevant seeing that Fr Jim has spent many years being a Rector in a Low Church parish, or to put it in another way, an Evangelical parish, whilst I have spent many years in a very High Church parish ... and here we meet at St Paul's, which has for many years been a "Middle of the road" parish. So both of us have needed to adapt to some extent.

These discussions gave me pause for thought, as I realised that for many years I had only ever really discussed the idea of a High, Middle and Low Church with fellow clergy, I had never really formally addressed the idea through teaching or a sermon. Tonight I wish to touch on this subject of levels of worship, looking at some of the origins of the early Anglican Church, as well as where you and I fit in today.

Let me just say from the very outset, that this topic may be sensitive for some people and I respect that. Worship, where we worship, how we worship and when we worship is an intensely personal matter. My aim this evening is merely to shed a little light on the incredible variation within the broad Anglican Church and how we fit into it here at St Pauls.

Looking back into Ecclesiastical History, we note that during the 1500's several groups in Europe began to break away from the Roman Catholic Church. The main characters leading this drive were men like Luther, Zwingli and Calvin. Their main concerns were that the church had strayed from the essential teachings of Christ. These early rebels started a movement that came to be known as the Protestants. This was part of the Reformation.

Around this time, King Henry the Eighth, King of Britain, chose to break away from the authority of the Catholic Church in England. The main purported reason for doing so, was the wish to be divorced from Catherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne Boleyn. The Pope refused to grant permission and the

rest is history, so they say. Scholars have also suggested, in recent years, that part of Henry's agenda was to also gain state control of the Church.

Whilst the Anglican Church originated during the political reign of Henry, it was only during the reign of his son, King Edward the Sixth, that many new reforms were introduced. Whilst many familiar traditions were kept, Edward allowed Thomas Cranmer to introduce various Protestant reforms such as having the Bible and services in English.

Mary, daughter of Henry and Catherine of Aragon then worked hard at restoring full communion with the Roman Catholic Church.

Eventually, Anne Boleyn inherited a country essentially in a civil war between the Reformers and the Catholics. So the policy of Via Media or "Middle Road" was born... an attempt to find a compromise between the Protestant and Catholic Tradition.

The 1600s came along and some parishioners felt that the Anglican Church did not have enough austerity and should be stripped of everything that resembled the Old Catholic Traditions, like altars, candles, crosses and choirs. There were calls to replace these with white washed walls with scripture and preaching being the only central focus. Those seeking austerity would become known as The Puritans. They would eventually become part of the Low Anglican Church. They would share many common goals and views with the Protestants.

In antithesis to this, there were some Anglicans who preferred to see themselves as a continuation of the Catholic Tradition. These worshippers became known as the High Church, as they placed great value on the things such as ordained orders, the Book of Common Prayer with all of its rituals, feasts and saints days. High Church worship is known for its reverence and dignity. The modern Anglo-Catholic movement see the High Church as part of their heritage.

The 1700s saw the Anglican Church in a slight backsliding where clergy were frequently absent, both in body and spirit. This, in turn, contributed to the rise of Methodism, whereby Christians were encouraged to experience God through prayer, meditation and self-examination. The Evangelical Anglican

Church that grew during this time was largely responsible for acting on social issues like helping to stop child labour and slavery. The Evangelical Tradition is also often associated with the Low Church.

During the 1800s the Oxford Movement started. Here a group of Anglican Priests from Oxford University began to publish a series of documents that would later become instrumental to a High Church revival. Men like Keble, Newman and Pusey ensured that the Anglican Church once again acknowledge their Catholic roots and emphasised the importance of celebrating the Sacraments as the central act of worship along with the use of beautiful symbols, art, architecture and vestments.

The 1900s saw the rise of the Charismatic Movement within the Anglican Communion of the 1960s and 1970s. Charismatics emphasize an openness to the power of the Holy Spirit moving in their lives and worship.

Where do you and I fit in?

St Pauls would traditionally be seen as a “middle” of the road church that is neither Low nor High. I am reminded of the labels Low and Lazy/ Broad and Hazy/ High and Crazy.

The truth of the matter is that we worship where we feel comfortable and able to access God through a specific style of worship. There is no right and wrong when it comes to choosing a High, Middle or Low Church. We worship where our needs and feelings are met. I do believe that Jesus does not mind where we choose to worship. He does not mind if we prefer a High, Middle or Low Church. He does mind whether or not we actually go to church, whether or not we read the scriptures, pray and fast. These disciplines are far, far more important than whether we label ourselves as Anglo-Catholics or Evangelicals. People are different. People change. The numerous styles of worship within the Anglican Church essentially cater for all of our needs as a diverse group of Christians.

The Anglican Church, by tradition and necessity, has always been progressive and open to dialogue, change and debate. It is this exact same tradition of compromise and acceptance that has allowed and encouraged, various forms of worship within the Anglican Communion and Umbrella. This is one of our

strengths that we need to honour, celebrate and protect at all costs. All Anglican Churches proclaim Jesus as Saviour and God as Father, whether it is done with smells and bells or choruses and dancers, the allegiance to Jesus remains the same... the methods of worship merely differ.

Our role as Christians within the Anglican community is to remain open to various styles of Anglican Worship so that we may be seen as inclusive and not exclusive. We are also able to learn from different styles of worship.

Jesus preached inclusivity.

Jesus preached love.

This is the essence of all styles of true worship.

May it be yours too.

Amen.