

Catholic

Eleven years ago when the Church Council was looking for a new priest, it produced a kind of prospectus, describing the church as being the Liberal Catholic tradition. This description has been repeated in various contexts over the last few years, not least in the current website where we say

The liturgy and spirituality at both churches is in the liberal catholic tradition.

This week and next I want to explore what is meant when we say that we are in the liberal catholic tradition. Next week I want to look at the word liberal; today the word catholic.

Now the word catholic has a meaning beyond church circles. One definition I found was this:

broad or wide-ranging in tastes, interests, or the like.

And this meaning is where we need to begin because the first and primary meaning in the church is exactly the same – broad, wide ranging. The Christian church grew up in lots of individual cities such as Jerusalem, Antioch and Rome. And in each city the Christian faith had its own characteristic as was inevitable when communication was much slower and more uncertain than it is now. But the early church leaders were quite clear that although superficial variations were quite acceptable there was a core of unchangeable belief and behaviour. Each city church was a part of a wider, catholic church.

This is shown very clearly in the New Testament. For example in his letter to the Ephesians Paul writes

There is ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:5

The whole of the New Testament is about ensuring the unity of the catholic church. The Gospels were written down to make sure that every congregation had the same account of Jesus' life and teaching. So for example if some one were to claim that it is always easy being a Christian, another could point to today's gospel and Jesus' words

If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me

Matthew 16:24

The letters were written to ensure that individual congregations were clear about what the whole catholic church believed and how Christians ought to behave. So if one Christian were to say it does not matter how we treat each other, then another could refute that falsehood by quoting from today's reading from the letter to the Romans:

Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Romans 12:16

But inevitably there were some who did not want to accept the teachings of the whole catholic church. Paul was quite outspoken about this when he wrote to the Galatians:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!

Gal 1:6-8

What happened in practice was that the church made it very clear that those congregations or groups of people who lived in a way contrary to the gospel or who held beliefs were not part of the catholic church. And

so the word catholic developed a new significance. It became a kind of boundary. And those who were beyond the boundary were outside the catholic church – they were heretical sects. And in the early years of the church there were many such beliefs:

- that Jesus was not divine
- that Jesus was not human
- that normal morality did not apply to Christians
- that Christians should follow the requirements of the Jewish law
- that the Old Testament was unnecessary.

All these were outside the catholic church. They were heresies. And one of the reasons for drawing up the creeds, four hundred years after the time of Jesus, was to make clear what exactly the catholic or orthodox faith was.

Few of the heresies of the first fifteen hundred years ever had a great number of followers. But exactly five hundred years ago there arose a new division that was to reshape the Christian Church. This was the protestant Reformation.

This was spurred by a number of concerns:

- first that the church as an institution was corrupt, openly encouraging bribes and living in a worldly way quite incompatible with the teaching of Jesus;
- second, that some of its practices were contrary to the teaching of the gospel, such as the reading of the bible and services in a language, Latin, which was no longer understood by most people and the enforcement of celibacy on its clergy;
- third that it encouraged Christians to believe that they were put right in the eyes of God not by any fundamental change of heart by doing superficial good deeds who could often be reduced to giving money to the church.

The early reformers wanted the Church as an institution to change but they soon decided that this was impossible. They left in various ways. Sometimes whole nations left. So the leaders of many German states simply declared that their church was now independent of the Pope and would make its own rules based on a direct interpretation of the scriptures. Others took a more radical stance and simply set up their own congregations and appointed their own leaders.

From the point of view of the leadership of the Catholic church this was the latest in a long line of heresies. But this one was more powerful than anything before it. And it was permanent. It is still with us.

From the point of view of many Protestant leaders the Catholic church was no longer the heart of orthodoxy; it was now the heresy. And so the term catholic became a term of abuse, a symbol of all that was wrong with the church as an institution. But others adopted the term for themselves. Protestantism was part of the world wide, universal church. And so the term catholic became used in a reconciliatory sense. Protestants and the Church of Rome were all part of the one holy catholic church. And to distinguish the two, those who had formerly been known as Catholics were now known as Roman Catholics.

The place of England in all this was ambiguous. The Church of England separated from Rome because Henry VIII and his government did not want a foreign leader, the Pope, interfering in domestic matters. It was Brexit! There was initially no sense that this was part of the Protestant Reformation. But it was inevitable that once the Church of England was self governing there would be those who wanted to take it in a more Protestant direction. So, pretty soon it allowed clergy to marry and replaced the Latin Prayer Book and Bible with versions in English. A hundred years later, in the time of Oliver Cromwell it went much further and abolished the prayer book altogether and abolished bishops. These reforms were short-lived and were reversed in 1662 shortly after the restoration of the monarchy.

The tensions between Catholicism and Protestantism which lead to civil war in 1642 remain. They became stronger in the Nineteenth century when there were renewal movements in the church, some from a Catholic

direction and some from a Protestant direction, although the latter was more commonly known by then as evangelical. The effects of these catholic and evangelical renewal movements are still with us and there is still a number of organizations within the Church of England which have a very clear catholic or evangelical agenda.

So we now have a new meaning to the word catholic: a particular identity within the Church of England. In broad terms we can say that the catholic identity within the church of England has a strong sense of how much it has in common with the Roman Catholic Church world wide. So, for example, when I am on holiday in France or Spain I feel that the local Roman Catholic Church is the natural place to go on a Sunday morning. The Catholic identity within the Church of England also has a strong sense of a continuity with its own past. So if someone were to ask me who founded the Church of England I might reply St Augustine in the year 597 when he was consecrated as the first Archbishop of Canterbury. I would never claim that Church of England was founded by Henry VIII in 1536.

This sense of being part of the whole catholic church has practical implications. Those who are catholic have a strong sense of the importance of the sacraments. That is why every Sunday the principal service is always the mass; that is why the mass is celebrated several times during the week. We have a sense that our worship needs to be liturgical. This means that we follow an agreed order of service, pretty much the same every week, not varied at the discretion of the priest.

And of course we value physical, material ways of worshipping: we encourage people to use holy water, candles, the sign of the cross in worship. We use our body as well as our minds.

But when we say that church is in the catholic tradition we need to be very clear that all are welcome. Indeed it is likely that very few in this congregation today would explicitly identify themselves as catholic. Some will know that the style of worship here suits them and some will choose to worship here because of that; others will worship here because it is their local, parish church.

But in the end there is a house style in what we do and in the way we present the Christian faith. The best way to describe that house style is Liberal Catholic. And next week I will attempt to explain the word Liberal.

N Clews

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