

Liberal

Last week I said something about why this congregation is sometimes described as being 'catholic'. It is also described as being 'liberal' and today I want to say something about what that means.

Perhaps I can sum it up by saying that the liberal approach to scripture and tradition is to make very wide use of all secular knowledge and of our ability to think and reason. The opposite approach, usually called conservative or perhaps traditional, is to take scripture and tradition as they are presented to us without too much interpretation. It goes without saying that there are many shades of approach in between the two extremes.

This distinction probably did not have a great deal of significance until the nineteenth century, when scientists began to develop theories of evolution and suggested that the earth was millions of years old. This seemed to contradict both the creation story in Genesis, which described the creation of many individual species at the beginning of time, and also calculations from biblical evidence which seemed to show that the earth was created in the year 4004 BC.

There were two kinds of response to this. Some Christians argued that since the bible could not be wrong then the scientists were mistaken. The theory of evolution was an error. This is the view we might call conservative.

Other Christians, however, argued that the scientists were likely to be right in which case we needed to rethink how we interpreted the bible. This is the view that we might call liberal.

The liberal view is based on two assumptions. The first is that scientific research is God given. God gave us eyes and ears to observe what happens in the world; he gave us minds to interpret what we observe. In fact this principle is found in the bible itself as Paul writes to the Romans:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.

Romans 1:19-20

And if this is true, then it is reasonable to trust what we observe and the conclusions we draw. This is not to say that these natural gifts are infallible. We all mis-see; we mishear; we are guilty of faulty reasoning: scientific theories which have been believed for years are sometimes replaced by new theories, For example, there was once a time when all scientists believed that the sun orbited the earth. But to say that science can be wrong is not to say that it is totally unreliable.

The second principle of liberal thinking is that we need to be very discriminating in how we read the bible. This comes pretty naturally in everyday life: I can tell the difference between instructions on operating a dishwasher and a sonnet by Shakespeare; between a newspaper report and an argument from a political party. This kind of discrimination may come naturally in reading the bible. But sometimes we lay aside our skills when we open the bible and assume that everything is to be read literally. It follows that sometimes we need to make a conscious decision to engage our minds.

So, for example, I believe that the story of creation is not an historical account. I do not believe the world was made in six days and I do not believe that Adam and Eve are historical characters. These are stories intended to make certain points: that the earth and all that is in it is good; that the goodness has been corrupted by human sin and by an outside power of evil represented by the snake. These accounts are neither historical nor literal but they are profoundly true.

In this instance I think the majority of Christians would take the liberal view. But there is a minority who would argue that Genesis is to be taken literally and possibly a significant minority or even a majority in the United States perhaps including even the President himself.

The second example of the difference between liberal and conservative attitudes is found in the matter of women priests. Until fifty years or so it was taken for granted that the priesthood was open to men only. Jesus had chosen only male apostles; Paul's advice was obvious:

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

1 Corinthians 14:34-35

The church had been agreed for nearly two thousand years that these words were pretty straightforward. And yet we now have women deacons, priests and bishops in the Church of England. The majority of the Church of England is now persuaded that the practice of Jesus and the advice of Paul were appropriate for their own time but not meant to be binding forever. It is now normal for women to exercise leadership in the secular world and in that context it is also appropriate in the church.

But on this issue the church is less liberal than on the issue of creation. There is a significant minority in the Church of England which does not recognize women priests or male priests ordained by a female bishop; in the Anglican communion as a whole it is probably a majority and the Roman Catholic Church is still committed to a male only priesthood.

The issue that is proving most difficult in our own time is that of same sex partnerships. In the last fifty years English law has moved from making all male homosexual acts a crime to celebrating them in marriage. Many Anglicans are accepting of same sex partnerships and some clergy will bless them. But the Church of England has not produced an official liturgy for it, does not recognize same sex marriage and will discipline any of its clergy who enter such a marriage. Those who take a liberal attitude believe that the arguments against homosexual practices in the bible are few in number, in the case of the New Testament are comments in passing and in all cases refer to the kind of abusive same sex relationships that we would still want to condemn as immoral. Biblical writers simply did not know about faithful, committed, permanent relationship between people of the same sex.

Such a liberal view is common in developed countries but possibly not in the majority; in the third world the more conservative view undoubtedly prevails.

When we put together these two distinctions, catholic-evangelical and liberal-conservative, we find ourselves with four distinct kinds of attitude:

- liberal catholic
- liberal evangelical, more often referred to as open evangelical
- conservative or sometimes traditional catholic and
- conservative evangelical.

Many congregations would not advertise themselves as anything although an informed visitor would probably be able to discern where it's sympathies lay; and many individual Christians would not consciously identify with any of those attitudes even if they displayed them or adopted them to some extent; and many

Christians would worship at a church which did not perfectly reflect their own attitudes.

When on our website we advertise ourselves as being liberal catholic, we are by no means claiming that every member of the congregation holds those views. What we are saying is that the preaching, teaching and style of worship are in that tradition. That is to say:

- in our teaching and preaching we assume that science is a gift from God and that the scriptures need to be interpreted intelligently;
- in our worship we value the sacraments, a sense of formality and order, and appeal to all the senses;
- in our thinking we value our connection with the whole catholic church throughout the world and through the centuries.

And I think it is right that those who browse our website or read our literature should know what to expect. We are liberal catholic and I am very happy to be so.

N Clews
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