

Holy Week Compline 2015

Wed 1 April Prof John Morris

Conflict within the early church

Tonight we turn to a conflict that is with us still – namely conflicts within the church that calls itself Christian.

It all started off so well. There was the day of Pentecost and the coming of the holy spirit, giving power to the apostles, and Peter, responding to the suggestion that what the onlookers heard was the result of the apostles being drunk, says “Fellow Jews, and *all you* who live in Jerusalem” – note the inclusivity here “*all you* who live in Jerusalem”; Jerusalem was a very international city.

They met constantly to hear the apostles teach, and to share the common life, to break bread and to pray. *All those* whose faith had drawn them together held everything in common; they would sell their property and possessions and make a general distribution as the need of each required. And day by day the Lord added to their number.

Of course the conflict with the Temple authorities was not over, and they were hauled before the court on two occasions and asked by “By what power and by what Name have such men as you done this?” (Again note the snide comment about their Galilean origins.)

The first hint of conflict in the early church comes in Acts Chapter 6 “when the disciples were growing in number, there was disagreement between those of them who spoke Greek and those who spoke Hebrew; those who spoke Greek complaining that their widows were being overlooked in the distribution of food and money.” And so a very human response – set up the first church committee! “Therefore, friends, select seven men of good reputation from your number, men full of wisdom, and we will appoint them to deal with these matters, while we devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.” Stephen you will recall was the first elected and the first martyr.

Thus started a period of persecution for the church and we read that “all except the apostles were scattered over the country districts of Judaea and Samaria; interestingly in view of the regional conflict we looked at earlier, many Samaritans now believed. Peter is clearly the leader at this time but although he emphasizes the law say “Although I need not tell you that a Jew is forbidden by religion to visit or associate with those of other races; yet God has shown me that I must not call any man profane or unclean” and “I see now that God has no favourites but that in every nation the man who is god-fearing and does what is right is acceptable.” We read then that “The Jews who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit should have been granted to Gentiles.”

Here, then lies the core of the conflict – was Jesus message for everyone or just for the Jews? In Acts 11 we read “News came to the apostles and members of the church in Judaea that Gentiles had accepted the word of God; and when Peter came up to Jerusalem those who were of Jewish birth said to him “You have been visiting men who are uncircumcised, and eating at table with them!” Peter tells them about his vision in Joppa and things seem to be resolved “When they heard this their doubts were silenced; they gave praise to God and said “This means that God has also granted life-giving repentance to the Gentiles.”

Interwoven in Acts here is the start of the very familiar story of Paul and his conversion on the road to Damascus and it is now that the divisions of the Jesus movement – was it just for Jews or for everyone – become even more marked. In Antioch Paul preaching on the Sabbath urges both Jews and Gentiles to “hold fast to the grace of God” but we read “When

the Jews saw the crowds (which included gentiles) they were filled with resentment and abused Paul violently.” But Paul and Barnabas were outspoken “It was necessary that the word of God should be declared to you first” (this echoes Jesus’s own statement about coming first to the children of Israel) but they then go on with the incendiary statement “But since you reject it, we now turn to the Gentiles” for these are my instructions from the Lord “I have appointed you to be a light for the Gentiles , and a means of salvation to earth’s farthest bounds”. The Gentiles it is said were overjoyed, but the overwhelming majority of Jews expelled them from the district. Essentially the same happened in Iconium, and at Lystra where Paul was stoned.

The whole conflict continues to boil and in Acts 15 we read “Now certain persons from Judaea began to teach the brotherhood that those who were not circumcised could not be saved and this brought them into fierce dissension with Paul and Barnabas” and so what we might call the first General Synod was arranged in Jerusalem. While some of the Pharisaic party who had become believers insisted on circumcision, it was Peter who sums up after a long debate, reminds them that from his own lips he gave the message to Gentiles who received the Holy Spirit. “He purified their hearts by faith. We believe it is not by rules, but by the grace of the Lord Jesus that we are saved, and so are they!” James (Jesus brother?) agrees, quotes scripture as proof and ends “My judgement is therefore that we should impose no irksome restrictions (i.e. circumcision) on those of the Gentiles who are returning to God. And there was “agreement of the whole church” – perhaps for the first and last time!!

As we read on through Acts the Jew/Gentile conflict becomes more and more marked and Paul is again brought before the Council, having been rescued by the Roman commander from a crowd protesting against Paul for profaning the Temple by bringing in Gentiles and ‘attacking *our* people, *our* law’. In the Council Paul uses the Pharisee/Saducee conflict over the hope of the resurrection (which the Pharisees believed but the Saducees denied) and as a result of that unresolved conflict Paul is dragged off to Caesarea in the custody of the Romans.

And so these conflicts between the human interpretations of God’s will both within the Christian movement and between it and its Jewish origin have continued to this day. That with the Jews has never been resolved and, indeed, Moslems have even recently increased it (largely, it must be said on political rather than religious grounds); there is the split between the western and eastern church; the split between protestant and catholic – one could go on and on. Each group insisting on some aspect usually of their man-made custom to insist they are right and others are therefore wrong. What price Christian unity? I have no problem Christians who feel they would rather worship with guitars than organs; or those who would rather sit in silence waiting on God’s word than fill their services with vocal praise and prayer. These are all the ephemera, not the core.

It is the inability of humans to accept other points of view on the non-essential man-made accoutrements of religion that is so worrying. We fret more about these than about the real core. So let’s look back for holy week inspiration to a couple of those early statements “God has shown me that I must not call any man profane (because of his religious practice)” “Any man who is God-fearing and does right is acceptable” and – most tellingly – “It is by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that *we* are saved, and *so are they*.”

Let us hold fast to that statement of faith this Lent, and continue our life’s journey in a spirit of true Christian unity.