

DOING THE LAMBETH WALK

These thoughts were delivered in a sermon at Holy Trinity Church on 7th September but it has been suggested that I offer them to a wider readership.

I was reflecting on what we might learn as a church from the 2008 Lambeth conference – the 10 yearly gathering of worldwide Anglican bishops in Canterbury for mutual support and discussion.

The impossible task, it seems to me, that the Archbishop of Canterbury has is to seek to enable the church to move forward, while at the same time facing its differences and yet still holding together. As impossible a task as trying to solve the Rubik's cube: as soon as you have one part of the puzzle aligned, you immediately realise you have put out of alignment the rest of the cube!

So how did our Archbishop approach the Lambeth conference?

Three things struck me in particular:

1. He started the whole conference off by focusing on prayer, worship and learning together with a three day closed retreat.
2. He made sure that a good deal of time at the conference was devoted to common, unifying themes of mission to people in need around our world. For instance all the bishops went on a march past Downing Street to put pressure on their governments to make more headway with the Millennium Development Goals of: reduction of poverty and hunger, primary education for all, working towards gender equality, eradication of diseases like HIV/AIDS, Malaria & TB, working towards a sustainable environment & developing a global partnership.
3. In facing up to the sharp differences in the Anglican Communion, he arranged what are known as Indaba groups to enable people to listen to one another. These groups are based on an African model of consensus forming. The emphasis is on listening to one another rather than talking at one another and on there being unlimited time for consensus to emerge (though the unlimited time aspect was not achieved!). I was moved to hear of bishops saying that they may not have changed their basic stance but that they had understood more fully why their fellow bishops had come to a different conclusion, for instance, about homosexuality.

These three aspects of Lambeth, it seems to me, have much to teach us in our own parish life as we move into a period of thinking together about how our church will move forward together.

1. We must each make sure that the threefold stool of communal worship, private prayer and reflection and a commitment to continue learning about our faith is right at the heart of all of our lives.
2. We must make sure we focus on aspects of our calling to serve the needs of people today both on our doorstep and in the wider world. We must not be distracted from this by the things we are still not agreed on.
3. In our differences we must learn not the art of talking but the art of listening – listening with respect and generosity until we more deeply understand the person we are talking with. In the words of one bishop I heard speak this summer: “we must learn to do difference differently” and another: “we must grow big ears!”.

Our own autumn series of talks and discussions I hope will help us both to focus on our key mission priorities and also to listen to one another, especially where we differ. I hope you will try your best to join us at as many of these as possible.

And may we all grow Big Ears.
Blessings, Tim Stead.