

## **Pondering in my heart: Reflections on personal experiences of ECUSA, six years ago. Bishop Harold Miller - Church of Ireland**

by Bishop Harold Miller, Bishop of Down and Dromore, Church of Ireland.

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I should probably have said all of this six years ago, when I had just returned from being in the United States on Sabbatical, but it all seemed very subjective. What I noticed then were several trends in the Episcopal Church in the USA which have probably become more pronounced over the intervening years. Some, if not all, of these first-hand but subjective observations bring into focus key issues which are at the heart of the new ways of understanding the faith in The Episcopal Church today. These highlight the fact that the divisions we are experiencing in the Anglican Communion are not simply to do with sexuality. I write about these because it is important to note that there really is the beginning of a new kind of religion in parts of The Episcopal Church - a religion which not only re-interprets the traditional central tenets of the Christian faith, but which in fact has the potential to jettison many of them altogether

My first observation six years ago was the gradual replacement of the word 'Lord' in reference to Jesus Christ. There was a perceptible change as I travelled across from the east coast to the west, from the traditional: 'The Lord be with you' in the liturgy, to the revised version, 'God be with you', and eventually, on the west coast 'God is in you...and also in you'! The reason for the change is relatively obvious: 'Lord' is not only male, it is also perceived as authoritarian. But there is a great seriousness about a simplistic removal of the word, which would eventually preclude rather than necessitating the basic early Christian declaration of faith 'Jesus Christ is Lord' - the very declaration which all will make when every knee bows and every tongue confesses him.

Secondly, and aligned to the last point, is the removal or weakening of the title 'Father' in relation to the first person of the Trinity. This has led to an uncomfotableness for some with the basic baptismal formula: 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' and to replacement 'blessings' such as 'The blessing of God - Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer' where God is described by function rather than in personal names. Last year at the General Convention a series of prayers were introduced for every situation from a child coming out of nappies to a person passing a driving test, and including, of course, a 'coming out' prayer. When I asked myself why it was necessary to provide liturgical prayers for such occasions, the answer immediately stared me in the face: All the prayers were devoid of the words, 'Father', 'Son' and 'Lord', and clearly were enabling people to pray in this new way! But the removal of 'Father' (a revealed name of God) would be a disastrous move, since it is the name by which Jesus taught us to address God in the Lord's Prayer, and it is also central to the first tenet of the Apostles' Creed: 'I believe in God, the Father Almighty...'

My third observation was an emerging new theology of baptism. This was clarified for me when I was taken with members of the *International Anglican Liturgical Consultation* to a radical Episcopal church in San Francisco. When we entered into the liturgical space, I could see the table, which was unbounded by rails and clearly open to all. But I could not see the place of baptism. When I asked where it was, I was taken out the back, and told that it had been placed there so that baptism would not be a stumbling-block to newcomers. In other words, the idea goes, all people are welcome to the table no matter what their belief or lifestyle, as Jesus had table-fellowship with prostitutes and sinners. Baptism can be looked into later when there is time to think things through. This is, of course, a reversal of the biblical model, where baptism was the sacrament freely and always available for all who come to repentance and faith, and communion, the table fellowship of the baptized for which self-examination was necessary.

Aligned to that, I have also observed, and have seen particularly in the West Coast, an uncomfortableness with repentance and confession of sin. The theory, as I understand it goes something like this: The archetypal Eucharistic rite is focussed around the gathering, the word, the intercessions, the table and the going out. Confession is an optional extra. This was almost encouraged by the *International Anglican Liturgical Consultation* document on the eucharist, and by the pattern where the confession in the middle section was displaced when there was, for example a baptism, marriage, or an ordination. There has been a reclaiming of penitence in some of these rites recently, especially in the Church of England, by placing the penitential section at the beginning of the service. It is one thing to omit penitence in a church which has the expectation of personal auricular confession, but quite another to omit it in a church of the Reformation which enjoins General Confession. There is, in my view, behind this, a serious underplaying of personal sin and personal salvation.

The next element of the liturgy to be 'downplayed' was historic Creeds. Again, we are told that the Eucharistic prayer is creedal (a part-truth), or that Creeds are not a necessary part of worship (another part-truth), but the eventual reality which I observed was the omitting of the historic creeds altogether in the main Sunday liturgy. I was sensitized to expect something of this sort several years ago when I met a very radical Presbyterian minister from Albuquerque. I asked him did they have the historic creeds in the worship of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. His answer was this: 'Yes. We have fourteen declarations of faith at the back of the book and they all interplay with each other'! There is a real reaction to and distancing from propositional statements of faith, even the historic ecumenical creeds - and in some cases from their central tenets and beliefs.

Sixth, and following on from the last point, there is an inclination to try to find ways of holding all faiths together as believing in a common god. This is seen, for example in Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, where there is an interfaith labyrinth and an interfaith chapel, in which the symbols of all the major world faiths are displayed. This makes its way into the liturgy, where, when the Eucharistic bread is broken, I heard words similar to the following used: 'We break this bread for our ancestors in the Jewish faith, our brothers and sisters in Islam, our friends who are Buddhists etc. ....' - and this at a key Christocentric part of the liturgy.

And last, though in fact there are many other observations I could also make, there is, in my personal subjective view, a dawning realization that the heart of the central act of worship (the bread and wine of communion) is the doctrine of the atonement - a doctrine increasingly disliked in the new religion. I noticed an increasing emphasis on the eucharist as 'community meal', a reduced emphasis on the sacrificial death of Christ in some newer eucharistic prayers, and the preference in some places to distribute the elements with words such as 'the bread' and 'the cup' rather than 'the body' and 'the blood'. Alongside this, the issue has been raised as to whether the Words of Institution ('this is my body' ... 'this is my blood') are required for a eucharistic prayer. Whatever disagreements on eucharistic doctrine there may have been between 'catholics' and 'evangelicals' in the past, there was always an agreement that the heart of the matter was the sacrificial, atoning death of Christ.

I write all this because we need to be aware that change is incremental. It is only noticed after a period of time. I do not say this to 'damn' the Episcopal Church. Indeed, my own diocese is in a very happy link relationship with a diocese of the Episcopal Church. But changes are happening, and changes which are not peripheral, but central to our identity as Anglicans and indeed as Christians. The issue which we face, as has so often been pointed out, is not essentially one of sexuality but one of authority and doctrine. In so many ways, parts of the Episcopal Church have been losing deep aspects of their identity. If God is not Father, Jesus is not Lord, the Son is not unique, baptism is not necessary, the creeds are optional, repentance and sin are dated concepts and the atonement is marginalized or even rejected, where do we go from here? The faith remaining will be a very different faith from the Christian faith once delivered to the saints - and I, for one, am not going there!

*Harold Miller August 2007*