

## St Luke 2020

How many Anglicans does it take to change a lightbulb? Ten – one to change the bulb, four to argue about how to change the bulb and five to comment on how much better the old bulb was even though it no longer worked.

There is a saying about Anglicanism, ask ten Anglicans a question and you will get thirteen different answers.

Few of us can have failed to notice that in recent months and years, there have been discussions within our blessed Anglican Church that have not been easy. Discussions about gender, sexuality, openness and inclusion. Pressures posed by decades of decline and the urgency to take action post-Covid to make the Church of England fit for purpose going forward, have intensified some of these debates. Some of these discussions have cut right to the core of what it means to be an Anglican. But the fact that it can debate these things openly and that a whole array of views are represented, is, in my opinion, a great Anglican strength.

Nonetheless, it is difficult; partly because it is a very counter-cultural way of looking at the world, and so the world struggles to understand. The world so often takes such a black and white view of things and denies the grey areas within the issues that affect our daily lives. Sadly, it is so easy for Christians to fall into this mindset too – and we see evidence of this all too often. But, we have to admit that it would be so much easier if God would fit into the box of our own making, where everything is black and white. Except of course that things never are, and that is not how God works.

A spiritual director once challenged me over my occasional tendency to be too rigid. He reminded me that “Grace always comes before Law”.

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In almost any scenario, things are rarely rigid and when they are assumed to be real people get hurt. But Grace is always abounding. Or to quote from the opening chapter of St John’s Gospel: ‘From God’s fullness we have all received grace upon grace.’

‘Grace upon grace’ constantly flowing over us and healing us. ‘Grace upon grace’ opening our eyes to new possibilities and a world as yet unknown. ‘Grace upon grace’ filling our lives with power from on high and making us new.

Anglicanism tries its best to be completely open and true to the true complexity present in issues of spirituality and morality. As such, our blessed Anglican church is one of the only places in the world where you will find diversity in such completeness. It doesn't matter your gender, sexuality, skin colour, social demographic, how poor or rich you are and it doesn't matter what lies in your history. If Anglicanism is working well, there should be many churches where such diversity can be found in the one building. Along this vein, over the coming years we will continue to work hard to ensure that our churches in the Benefice are as welcoming and inclusive as possible. It is my belief that difference does not cause division, unless we allow it too. Far from it, somewhere in the middle of all this diversity, God is certainly speaking to us! If you feel passionately about this too, then get on board and we would love to hear from you.

Our diversity is one of our most treasured assets. It may mean that we are all regularly challenged to rethink our position on important issues, and as we do so we develop our own personal integrity in faith – proper integrity that is formed by thinking about things openly and thoroughly under the Anglican principles of tradition, scripture and reason all under guidance of the Spirit. If we become completely immovable and set in our ways, then we should question whether we have actually lost our way.

Today is the Feast day of St Luke and we think about his witness. It is believed that St Luke wrote Luke's Gospel account of Jesus' life and the Book of Acts which records the events of the Early Church. Luke is also written about in some of the Letters of the New Testament. Both the Gospel of St Luke and the Book of Acts are written in a style of historical narrative that shows Luke's educated background. Luke is thought to have been a physician (or doctor) and he shows a particular concern to reveal Jesus' ability to heal the whole person, body mind and spirit. Luke is today patron saint of artists, physicians, surgeons, students and butchers. He is himself often associated with healing and writes in a way that is clear, gentle and open. All these accounts reveal a highly intelligent person, but imagine how open-minded Luke must have been to write the life of Jesus and the chronicles of the Early Church in such an open manner and resist the negative influence of the culture around him?

Luke simply seems concerned with providing the Church with accurate historical evidence concerning Jesus and the Early Church, uninhibited by external criticism and ridicule. He presents Jesus as the ultimate healer As he does so he aids the Church's growth. His deep desire seems to be to afford every individual the opportunity to encounter God's healing grace found in and through Jesus Christ, to change their lives for the better. As a

thorough and thoughtful person, I like to think that Luke himself may have approved of Anglicanism at its best.

But just like Anglicanism today, Luke is writing to an audience that is entrenched in a rather hostile culture. In today's readings, we see Jesus as commissioning seventy new followers and sending them out to spread the good news and to care for the sick. He warns them that they are being sent out as lambs amongst wolves. This is a clear reference to the hostile situation the Early Church found itself in – they were trying to spread the gospel to a society that ridiculed it and would rip it apart.

But God had other plans. Indeed, he still has other plans. Even though 'the labourers are few, the harvest is plentiful'. As the book of Acts details so well, despite every attempt from society to suppress and destroy the Church, where it remains open and faithful, it grows. Even the murder and martyrdom of the early Apostles, cannot stop the healing power of God succeeding. The same is true today. It may not be growing everywhere, but in many places throughout the world the Church is growing exponentially.

When being asked in a television interview about the apparent violence and immorality of the world today, Desmond Tutu once said: "Goodness prevails. When we look around us we see that this is a moral universe".

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There is no doubt that over the past two thousand years humanity has become increasingly more tolerant and compassionate as a result of the spread of the Christian message. There are always blips and hiccups, sometimes appalling ones, but it is undeniable that the last two thousand years have moved in an upward moral trajectory. But rigidity rarely contributes to that good.

Imagine how wonderful it can be to allow ourselves to ponder, explore and experience new things and delve deeper into what God might be asking of us and calling us to be! Our churches, under the example of Luke and the Apostles, are simply here to try and bring people to know the healing power and love of Jesus through word and sacrament: encouraging a regular pattern of encounter with the holistic healing grace of God, who will not be contained within the narrow box that we so often try and fit him into. This is the God who neither heaven, nor the heaven of heavens can contain.

Just like St Luke recognised, our churches are here to offer a long-term engagement with the Jesus who embraces all and heals all, just by his presence. Jesus guides us back to the Father where ultimate healing is to be found. If we can try and resist our inner urges towards judgementalism

and rigidness. If we can be forgiving, understanding, generous, encouraging, supportive. If we can build people up and not bash them down. If we can offer hope and joy and not despondency and negativity; if we can have the inner security to ponder new things without feeling too threatened, then it can be a positive and enriching experience for all. The Gospel is the most attractive thing, like St Luke, it is our job to present it in such a way so that others are drawn into its radiance.

Amen.