

St Luke's in the City

4th Sunday after Pentecost

24 June 2007

Celebrating at the Crossroads

Dear Friends,

Last week I wrote about the classical Anglican (so-called) three legged stool – Scripture, tradition and reason. In this week's reflections the tidiness of that Anglican tripod becomes a little less so. The appeal to reason spares Christians from the tyranny of Scripturalism and traditionalism, through the acknowledgement that God reveals God's-self not only through ancient texts and ancient church practices and creeds, but also through the human capacity to reason. Revelation, when reason is admitted, can never be summed up in the singularities of either bible or the teachings of the early church 'Fathers'. Hence, our neat Anglican tripod. One of our early giants, Richard Hooker, recommended the appeal to reason as the moderate course between Rome on the one hand and Geneva on the other. A critical use of human reason enables us to examine the biblical texts using the insights from historical, linguistic, archaeological and anthropological sciences. In contrast to straitjacketing tendencies of both scripturalism and traditionalism, the application of reason has opened the Scriptures and the tradition to live and breathe in each successive generation. In the last century the application of reason has fostered both critical Biblical studies as well as the liturgical movements. Christian faith, reason insists, does not mean checking one's brain at the church door. 'Thinking welcome here!'

However, there is another manner by which God reveals God's-self to humans – experience. Strictly speaking, 'reason' is a term from philosophical discourse, and there are fine arguments here about which I am unqualified to comment. Suffice to say that 'sensory experience' can be regarded as the opposite of 'reason'. So experience is in some respects a fourth leg to the Anglican stool. Experience tends to be very subjective, sometimes strictly personal, though there is also a communal dimension. Peter's vision on the rooftop of Simon the tanner's house in Joppa was a personal, subjective sensory experience. There was no rational basis for Peter's experience, though after the event he was able to draw upon the reality of his sensory experience in the service of a rational re-imagining of not only the food laws but also the purity codes more generally as justification for baptising a household full of Gentiles. The fact that he did so, against the full force of Jerusalem church Biblicism and traditionalism makes all the difference to you and me, for we would possibly not be here at all in the household of faith but for Peter's willingness to trust his experience! And ever since there have been countless faithful believers of Bible and tradition who have trusted this fourth leg of revelation. In spite of apparent conflict with Scripture and tradition, their experiences, like Peter's, have precipitated transformation of both church and world. May we too be open to God's Spirit, blowing through the Scriptures and the Tradition of the church, enlightening our minds, and revealing unexpected truths through sensory experience.

With my love,

David