

Optional Orthodoxy

By Mark Burkill

Jesus tells us that ‘there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed’ (Luke 8:17). In recent months there has been exposure of what some have called the ‘relentless trajectory’ on which the Church of England is travelling. The outcome of the February General Synod would have been shocking whichever way the ‘take note’ debate ended because it revealed the numbers who have abandoned any pretence at living under biblical authority. Then the bullying of Rt Revd Philip North into withdrawing from being Bishop of Sheffield revealed the intolerance of the worldly ideology which is pursued instead.

We must not avoid the fact that manifestations of this relentless trajectory are also to be found on the ground, perhaps in a parish next door to you. Gardeners are always shocked at this time of year by the number of weeds that appear in unexpected places. Naturally, there are congregations where there is remarkable fruit from a ministry which honours the Lord. Bishop Rod Thomas has noted this during his travels around the country (see his newsletter). Nevertheless, we should not ignore the reality of what is happening at parish level within the Church of England.

There is a desire to cover up the deep-rooted unfaithfulness of many in our dioceses and parishes by using phrases like ‘walking together’. The latest one emerged from the Archbishops’ letter after General Synod in their reference to ‘radical inclusion’. Such phrases make ordinary, orthodox Christian belief optional. They end up denying that the Bible speaks clearly on matters like human sexuality.

When we stop to think about it, optional orthodoxy makes a nonsense of the very concept of orthodoxy. Its absurdity was recently seen in the Bishop of Chelmsford’s address to his diocesan synod. He affirmed his own commitment to Canon B30 (which defines marriage, in line with the Bible, as between a man and a woman). However, he was also willing to say that those who believe there should be same sex ‘marriage’ were faithful Anglicans. How can those who say marriage is between a man and a woman be faithful Anglicans if those who contradict this are also faithful Anglicans?

The mirage of optional orthodoxy is steadily destroying the Church of England. This pernicious weed has taken root over many years because of a failure in leadership. The role of parish ministers and bishops is not to be an umpire between different pressure groups who insist they are faithful Anglicans and Christians. The role of a Christian leader is to teach the truth and expose error (see Titus 1:9). That is the only way in which the Church of England will be reformed and ReNewed.

Inevitably, if you are not confident that the Bible can speak clearly, and indeed does speak clearly, on human sexuality, the nature of Christ and other matters, then you will have no solid basis for teaching truth and exposing error. Plural truth and optional orthodoxy is an impossible basis to lead any Christian community at either a local or national level.

One suspects that the Lord is slowly but surely exposing our true attitude to the clear voice by which he does speak to us. We are warned in Hebrews 4:12-13 about the way in which our true attitude to God and His Word will be uncovered. If we hear God’s voice and yet harden our hearts to that (note the context of chs3-4 in which the writer directs our attention to Psalm 95:7) then we must know that the real thoughts and attitudes of our hearts will be laid bare. Disobedience cannot be hidden for ever.

Perhaps even more striking is how Jeremiah speaks of this concerning the leaders of the people of God. He says that the prophets in Jerusalem ‘strengthen the hands of evildoers, so

that no-one turns from his wickedness' (23:14). Chris Wright's comments on this verse (Jeremiah BST pp249-50) are ones we must heed in the current circumstances: 'When those whose job it should be to warn the wicked and call them to repentance, actually confirm them in their wrongdoing and their non-repentance, they put people into the greatest danger of all. For if you close the door on repentance, you close the only door to the grace of forgiveness. It is a warning to all pastors and preachers: be careful not to approve what the Bible condemns, or to be silent about the repentance that the Bible demands'.

No wonder the Lord then declares through Jeremiah that his word is like fire and a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces (23:29). If the Lord's word is not bringing us life and joy then it will bring us destruction. If our hearts are hardened to his Word then we should know that it is not then emptied of its power. Any individual, any congregation, and any denomination which despises the word of the Lord will be smashed by that same word.

It is in facing up to such realities that we may begin to find light and hope in the Lord's undeserved mercy, as those who responded to Jeremiah's ministry found hope in the promise of the new covenant (Jeremiah 31). That is why I am not without hope as we face the relentless trajectory within the Church of England.

Neither Reform or anyone else can provide ready-made solutions to our problems which enable us to avoid the personal pain involved in holding on to our courage and the hope of which we boast (Hebrews 3:6). We need to keep pursuing the ReNew agenda of healthy local Anglican churches and Reform is here to provide support and wisdom in facing the challenges of doing this in our current Anglican environment. Clause 13 of the Jerusalem Declaration says 'we reject the authority of those churches and leaders who have denied the orthodox faith in word or deed'. When we have to put this rejection into practice it will bring costly consequences.

However, where there are ministers and congregation members who are prepared to do this so that the voice of the Lord may be clearly heard then there is no reason to be downhearted. Paul seeks prayer that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured (2 Thess 3:1). That is surely what we must be praying at this time. In whatever circumstances we find ourselves, this must be our great plea to the Lord. This is how the Lord may yet bring a halt to the 'relentless trajectory'.