

Session Four Teaching Material and Handout

Zooming in on Bishops (picking up on Pastoral oversight, Ordination, Icon)

Prayer

O Almighty God, who by thy Son Jesus Christ didst give to thy Apostle St Peter many excellent gifts, and commandedst him earnestly to feed thy flock: Make, we beseech thee, all Bishops and Pastors diligently to preach thy holy Word and thy people obediently to follow the same, that they may receive the crown of everlasting glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Qualifications for becoming a Bishop

These are spelt out in Titus 1:5-9 and in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Don't miss the emphasis on the **bishop as father to the local church!**

"Overseer" sounds rather a grim word. But St Paul reminds us in Acts 20:28 what this **"oversight" means: to be a shepherd to the flock** which Christ has bought with his own blood. And in 1 Peter 5:1-4, where the Apostle is addressing bishops/elders, he spells out what oversight is.

Oversight is closely connected with shepherding. Jesus said to Peter, "Feed my lambs, feed my sheep" (John 21:15,16). In 1 Peter 2:25 Christ is called "the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls", and in 5:4 He is "the chief Shepherd." This **pastoral care** is marked by the sign or **symbol of the shepherd's crook** which our bishops carry today at key moments, such as at an Ordination.

The Bishop Ordains

Ordination is done through the laying-on of hands as the Holy Spirit transmits His grace to the newly ordained. The physical contact is important. The Bishop puts his hands on the head of the new Priest as a sign that he is a new link in the chain that connects the Priest to the Bishop to the Apostles to Christ to the Father. This is not a fancy bit of history, merely what was done long ago. Think of the ordinations you may have gone to – if you were near enough to see!

The physical sign shows us what is happening. It has both meaning and power. That is why we call Ordination a "Sacrament".

The Bishop as Icon.

St Ignatius, Bishop of Syrian Antioch, is a splendid example of one of our earliest bishops. He died shortly after 100 AD, and wrote letters to the churches he would pass on his forced journey to Rome where he faced martyrdom in the "games" in the arena, the grisly ruins of the Colosseum visited by so many tourists.

His stern letters, with an emphasis on the Eucharist, and on the ordained ministry and its meaning, shed light on what we read in the NT. He is so close in time to the Apostles that he could have known some of them personally. He must have known the Apostolic teaching perfectly, far more so than any modern scholars or theologians, because he was there! – part of the apostolic scene.

For those with access to the Internet, Google will find his letters for you to read in full. The short quotations below are from his letters to the Trallians and the Magnesians.

He writes:

"Let all respect the Bishop as a type of [God] the Father" (Trallians 3)

"You are in subjection to the Bishop as to Jesus Christ" (Trallians 2)

"The Presbyters yield to the Bishop, yet not to him but to the Father of Jesus Christ the Bishop of all" (Magnesians 3)

"Let all respect the Deacons as Jesus Christ, even as the Bishop is a type of the Father, and the Presbyters as the council of God and the college of the Apostles. Without these, the name of 'Church' is not given" (Trallians 3)

These passages invite and claim our deep attention. Ignatius is saying that when Christians are assembled (and in particular for the Eucharist) this iconic Ministry is the guarantor of the presence of God the Father in their midst. This we believe today just as we have always believed. Whatever form of service our local church uses for the Eucharist, we have all made a proclamation in words such as: "Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord", or "The Lord is here! His Spirit is with us."

> So it is important that the Bishop is himself, bodily (as Jesus is), a sign to remind us of Fatherhood. The symbol and the message connect – as we saw in Part 1.

It is this Ministry, and only this, says Ignatius, which makes a group of Christians **"Church", God's family with the Father in their midst.**

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What happened later?

We all know that the high standard of what a bishop should be, was not kept up as the centuries passed. History is full of lurid accounts which we can pass over here. Corruption in high places was of course one among several of the causes of the Reformation. At the break with Rome the Church of Rome claimed that the Church of England had severed the apostolic line of bishops and so was no longer part of the universal Church of Christ. The CofE claimed that her bishops were properly consecrated by valid bishops. The dispute has never been resolved, although we were once very close to it, almost there, but agreement foundered on the question of ordaining women.

This brings us to a crucial point in our discussion. We often hear it said that the Bishop is the “focus of unity”.

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It might be felt convenient to carry straight on, or else to pause here, and devote a further session to the remainder of Session Four.

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Prayer

O God, the light of the faithful and Shepherd of souls, who didst set Bishops in thy Church to feed thy sheep by word and example: Grant us, we pray thee, to keep the faith as we have received it through their teaching, and to follow in their footsteps; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Bishop as Focus of Unity

What does that mean? You may like to suggest some answers to this question. One obvious answer must be that the Bishop holds the Church together, united in basic belief and in action, fit for its mission to the world.

What that belief and action are, can be traced directly back to our Lord himself. We have already looked at the closing verses of St Matthew’s Gospel, and will remember that He commanded the Apostles to teach the things which He had taught them. They have **received** teaching from Him, and must **pass it on** exactly.

This highly important Apostolic function devolves on the Bishops who take the place of the Apostles. We can find huge emphasis placed on this throughout the New Testament. St Paul, himself an Apostle, albeit joining the group rather late in the day, insists repeatedly that he has **passed on** the teaching which he has **received**, and exhorts the new Bishops to do the same. Here are some passages of Scripture which show just how important this task is:

I Corinthians 11:23, and 15:1-3, II Thessalonians 2:15 and 3:6, I Timothy 4:16 and 6:20, II Timothy 2:2 and 4:1-5, Titus 1:9. Plenty to think about, as time allows!

Parish Priests, acting as “extensions” of the Bishop, must **pass on the received teaching** to their parishioners, whether from the pulpit, in study groups, or in “taking the confirmation class” as we say, teaching the basics of the faith to the confirmands.

The Bishop confirms

When the confirmands are ready, the Bishop, as Shepherd of souls with pastoral staff in hand, comes **to confirm them in the faith they have received** and learnt, and to unite them, by the laying on of hands and through the Holy Eucharist, into the one universal Church. All eyes are on the Bishop. Even in a very crowded church, and if you are not very tall, you can see where he is as the procession enters: first you see the Cross moving above the heads of the crowd, and at the back of the procession you will be able to see the tall mitre of the Bishop.

The work of a Bishop

This is set out very fully and clearly in The Consecration of Bishops in the Book of Common Prayer. When we think of bishops, how many of us have a picture in our minds of a Church of England bishop? But towards the end of the service, at the actual consecration, the Archbishop says, “Receive the Holy Ghost, for the office and work of a Bishop in the Church of God.” This is immensely wider than the Church of England. As we said earlier, we were at one time very close to agreement with Rome that our bishops are indeed “real” bishops. But the possibility of women as bishops has put that agreement on to a very distant horizon. So a woman bishop becomes immediately a cause and sign of disunity, instead of a focus of unity. And is she a symbol of fatherhood? And if not, is it indeed a church, over which she presides? And if not...?

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What now?

There is a minority in the Church of England which is in agreement with the Church of Rome and also with the Orthodox Churches. So this minority has enormous backing in “the holy Church throughout all the world.”

Discussion

Should this minority be allowed an honoured place in the Church of England?

In discussing this question we must always strive for peace and unity and charity.

Prayer at close of discussion

O Almighty God, who hast built thy Church upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the head corner stone: Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their doctrine, that we may be made a holy temple acceptable unto thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Essentials concerning the Bishop

- As Icon of God the Father:
he is father of the local Church
- As Shepherd of souls:
he ordains and confirms
- As the focus of unity he is responsible for:
Keeping the faith
Guarding the faith
Teaching the faith