

*Hew not out cisterns for yourselves
Which hold no water of God's grace
Three-fold the Church's ministry;
Nothing men scheme should take its place.*

*Worship our God as is his due,
Raiment of holiness your dress
In word and sacrament adore
Him whom our praises now address:*

*O Christ, our Master on the way,
Draw us from hence to realms above,
Where, in the blessèd Trinity,
Your Church will be made one in love.
Amen.*



'That they all may be one'

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THE MIDDLE STANCE

RICHARD HOOKER¹
AND
THE ENGLISH CHURCH

Who knows much about Richard Hooker these days? Maybe there is a speedy mention of him in our theological colleges and ministerial training schemes, but who actually reads him? Students of English prose?

Yet Hooker was the architect of the Anglican *Via Media*, that finely-nuanced comprehensiveness which seeks to embrace the wholeness of revelation by holding together the valid insights of the Catholic Orthodox and Reformed traditions. These are to be kept in creative tension without, in the ideal, compromising the truth or in any sense failing in mutual compassion and charity.

The Church of England has changed radically since the days of the Elizabethan Settlement, when Hooker was writing, and startlingly so in the last few years. So-called classical Anglicanism can seem like a shattered dream and its remnants largely irrelevant in a liberal age, and in a Christianity which is newly aligning itself in reaction to present trends.

However, we would claim that the basic Anglican charism, as briefly defined above, is of crucial importance at this time of upheaval. Despite everything, the C. of E. is still alive and hopefully kicking, though in part bruised and battered. It is trying to maintain itself against many odds and

¹ Richard Hooker (c. 1554-1600). Church of England priest, teacher and theological writer, Famous for his masterly exposition of what has become the classical Anglican tradition in his monumental work: *Treatise of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*.

rediscover its mission and *raison d'être* within the whole Christian spectrum, - for now, and for as long as it is destined to continue as a specific ecclesial entity. It is here that Richard Hooker can help us, by reminding us of those particular gifts and insights which we have inherited as Anglicans, and which we hold in trust for the whole of Christendom.

Just as Hooker sought to contain the best of both Puritanism and Catholicism within the newly-forming 'middle way' of the Elizabethan church in England, so we in our day have somehow to keep a host of balls more or less legitimately in the air: Porvoo and Forward in Faith, 'Reform' and the liberal agenda, dialogue with the Orthodox and charismatic renewal, ARCIC and the feminist movement ... to mention only a handful of current, and sometimes seemingly conflicting, issues.

But an all-embracing middle way must not become a syncretism or a wishy-washy apathetic lukewarmness. Neither must there be room for arrogance. Rather it is a call for endurance and a sharing in the Cross. Chaos and uncertainty must be lived with as we learn to stand unflinchingly in the midst of contradictions, bearing with one another in love, until the way forward is clarified.

As Richard Hooker taught so clearly, we must look to Tradition and continuity, to Scripture, Patristics and the right use of our reasoning and intellectual faculties, if we are to keep our bearings in the midst of innovation. God, most obviously, must come first - in a dignified worship and in a prudent sifting of the true from the false in doctrine, so that heresy might be exposed and dealt with. Being open to Tradition in this way does not of course mean a harking back to a dead past, but rather a continuing adherence to the fullness of revealed truth as it is repeatedly meted to us in the present, through the Spirit, from the Risen Christ now reigning in glory.

Hooker ostensibly begins from the basic 'given' of the natural law, common to all people and all times; but theologically his starting place is an exposition of the Tradition, i.e. of God the blessed Trinity, the centre of both unity and diversity. Inseparably bound up with this comes the aware-

ness that as God's created handiwork, we and all humanity are destined to attain union with him in this threefold relationship of love.

And following on naturally from here is an understanding of the Church as God's instrumental means for bringing about his purposes; that Church which has existed from the beginning and which is now recognised to be the body of the incarnate and glorified Christ, continuing in the world, with believers past and present as living members. Despite outward divisions it remains at heart one. Our task is to reform it, where needs be, yes, but also to be sure that in seeking to do so we are not severing ourselves from the Tradition or failing in love.

It is important therefore for us to draw closer together as Christians in the fundamentals of our faith, acting humbly towards each other and before God when we differ. Prejudice and recrimination must be set aside. Dialogue is better than confrontation or the hardening of positions. All this Hooker saw in his own day in connection with the contrasting ecclesiologies of Puritans and Papalists and the various shades between. He feared lest he himself should swing too far to the right or to the left. He feared for posterity - that is for ourselves.

We who follow on, therefore, some four centuries later, can be grateful to Richard Hooker for his guidance and concern, and might perhaps ask him to continue at prayer for us as we seek to put his vital insights into practice and receive the living Tradition ever anew, for the greater glory of God and his holy Church.

*This is the way, walk in that way,
And turn not to the left or right;
Keep to the royal road of truth,
Lay hold on love to be your light.*

*Scripture, Tradition, Reason, see
In these the cord not swift to break;
Laws of the Church's polity
Men in their peril would unmake.*