

CHANGE

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever. Hebrews 13:8

Change and decay in all around I see; O thou who changest not, abide with me (Hymnal # 662)



Supposedly it was the Greek philosopher Heraclitus (535-475 BC) who said, “The only constant in life is change,” “Everything flows” and “You can’t stand in the same river twice” (because it is constantly moving). Those Greeks knew a thing or two! I have been observing the Church for 50 years. I was ordained deacon by Bishop Vincent Gerard in Sheffield Cathedral (Yorkshire) on this day in 1970. I have witnessed many changes, some for the better and some for the worse. Change is inevitable but not always good. The changes that took place in the UK were often paralleled by

much the same changes in the USA. I want to use this opportunity to look at how we got to where we are, and if there’s time, where we go from here.

Fifty years ago we would never have dreamed that we would be worshipping via *zoom* on a Sunday morning. My first encounter with a computer was in the early ‘80s. What did we do back then on Sunday morning? The priest *was* the church, he took the services and he did all the talking.

But the Liturgical Movement was revolutionizing worship. Back then at my parish on a Sunday morning, there was Eucharist (or “Communion” as we called it) at 8:00 a.m. for a congregation comprised mostly of women. In the UK we still used the 1662 service; here you used the 1928 service. The congregation didn’t say much. There was no sermon. On a good day I could be home by 8:30 for breakfast.

The celebrant faced the east wall of the church with his back to the congregation, representing the people to God. (Some priests were audible; others were not). *He* turned to face the people for the readings. He stood on the right side (the “epistle-side”) of the altar for the epistle and then switched to the other side for the gospel (I don’t know why). A priest gave both the bread and wine at communion; there were no Lay Eucharistic Ministers. In a radical move in 1971, Eric, an ancient parishioner, was invited to distribute the wine for the first time.

On the 2nd and 4th Sunday, we sang Morning Prayer with choir and good old Anglican chants for the Psalm and the canticles. Attendance was better than when it was the Eucharist because the service was shorter. On the other Sundays we had Sung Eucharist. We sang hymns from *Ancient and Modern*, the Merbecke setting (16th century) and “The Lord be with you.” In 1973, “Series III” arrived and for the first time we addressed the Almighty in contemporary English (*you* and *your* instead of *thee* and *thou*). We returned to church for Evensong every Sunday with a second sermon.

At my parish, attendance was about 20 at 8, 70 at 10 and 30 at 6:30 plus five or six Sunday school classes. The average age of the congregation was much younger back then. Once a month we had parade services for the parish scouts and girl scouts who were called “Guides.” Teenagers from all over town came to our parish youth center for evenings of disco music and ping pong.

In the USA you had a new “proposed” Prayer Book in 1970 with a green cover. A revised version came out in 1973 with a black/white striped cover, called “the Zebra Book.” Then came the ‘new’ BCP in 1979 (shortly before we came to the USA). Supplemental liturgical texts have continued to appear, “Enriching our Worship.” You sang hymns from the *Hymnal 1940* till the *Hymnal 1982* came out in 1985. Many had difficulty with the changes to the services that they knew and loved. At the General Convention of 2000,

the Episcopal Church apologized to those who were “offended or alienated during the time of liturgical transition.”

My official title was “Assistant Curate.” My boss was Arthur, the vicar. He invited me to preach a sermon every other week, run the youth group and attend a few meetings. But his main emphasis was on visiting. He sent me out to visit every home regardless of whether the residents were C of E or Methodist or Catholic or agnostic. I learnt to make “cold calls.” After 3 years he moved on to higher things and I was the interim for nine months. Arthur encouraged me to do extra-curricular activities like getting married to Angela, getting involved in BBC Radio Sheffield organizing a 30-mile Christian Aid Walk fund raiser, taking a group to Taizé in France, plus Angela and I organized a pet show. It rained cats and dogs!

There were more seminaries back then, some of which have closed. The students coming out of seminary were mostly under 30; nowadays they are mostly over 40. There was money for vicars to recruit assistants and train them to work in parishes. Nowadays in this diocese there are only a couple of parishes which can afford a paid assistant priest. So those coming out of seminary do not get the training we all had.

I would guess that about a quarter of the students at my seminary were gay, but they had not come out of the closet. Some of them became outstanding priests; it cannot have been easy for them. Nowadays in the (liberal) dioceses where I have served, being gay has not been an impediment to being ordained. The number of priests in the C of E and in the Episcopal Church has declined, and of necessity the laity have picked up the slack: as parish administrators, Christian educators, Lay ministers, Lay preachers, Lay visitors. Where would our church be without them?

Back then of course there were no women priests. That has made a huge difference. We arrived in Hong Kong in 1974 which had been on the forefront of women’s ordination. In the USA, the “Philadelphia Eleven” were ordained in 1974, and ratified at General Convention in 1976. In 1994, the first thirty-two women were ordained as priests in England. By 2004, one in five priests in the UK was a woman. On the whole the UK has tended to lag behind the USA by at least 10 years, and the rest of the USA has lagged behind California!

In 1970, “inclusive language” had not been invented. The word “man” referred to both men and women. The church was called a “brotherhood.” The Trinity of “Father, Son and Holy Ghost” became “Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.” “Sons” became “children.” I think we read the King James Version of the Bible (from 1606), parts of which were/are incomprehensible. Biblical scholarship has moved on. In England the NEB (1970) was widely popular. The NRSV was not published till 1989, by which time we were in the USA. Political correctness came to the USA about 1970 and to the UK about 1975. In time, there was (and still is) a backlash, especially among conservatives.

It was not until 2002 that people who had been divorced could legally marry within the church. Before that time, clergy officiated at remarriages illegally. Otherwise couples were married at the registry office and then came to the church for a blessing on their marriage.

There are fewer of us in church nowadays, but I sense that we are more committed. We are getting older. A third are over 65. The amount that people give to the church has increased exponentially. People are more generous with their time. I think we have become more broad-minded in the past 50 years. Our “new” Prayer Book includes the Baptismal Covenant which hopefully shapes our values. We promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, and to strive for justice and peace, respecting the dignity of every human being. To which we respond we will with God’s help.

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The Golden Jubilee of my ordination