

ON BEING EXCOMMUNICATED: what does it mean to ‘break off’ communion?

The Bishop of Zambia has recently declared that his diocese is no longer in Communion with ECUSA or the Church of England. I can understand, while I do not wholly share, his sense of outrage at the recent events in the Anglican Communion which caused him and a number of his fellow bishops in Central and Southern Africa to make that sort of decision. But I particularly noticed his statement, because I quite often visit Zambia – and I am a member of the Church of England and, temporarily at least, of ECUSA too.

What will happen next time I visit the Cathedral in Lusaka? Will I be refused the elements at the altar rail? Or perhaps I will already have been theologically frisked and asked to leave with the catechumenate class before the Eucharistic Prayer? And what about a couple of people I know who have been working up in the Copperbelt? Will they have been thrown out of their diocesan house, and reduced to flogging off their designer jeans and Wippel’s vestments at the *sa’laua* stalls in the local market? More immediately, I wonder if the small contribution that we send to help a struggling AIDS project will be returned to me as ‘tainted money’?

Actually I don’t think any of these things will happen, and I believe that when I turn up there my soul will be restored again by the warmth and generous hospitality of the African church. What worries me more is that in the present unstable climate in which the Anglican Communion clings on to existence, few of us have thought much about what is involved in declaring ourselves ‘out of communion’ with fellow members of the body of Christ. I have just been reviewing the use of the concept of communion in the New Testament. It is not all that common. The word itself is mainly used by St Paul in working through his somewhat turbulent relationships with churches in Greece and Asia Minor. What is clear though is that in his thinking, to be called into fellowship with (God’s) Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (I Cor 1.9) is inevitably to be drawn into a partnership in the gospel, participation in subsidising the church in Jerusalem and elsewhere, and solidarity with the new ethical standards and possibilities brought about by life in the Spirit (Phil 1.5, Rom 15.26, II Cor 6.14, Phil 2.1). In Paul’s thinking it does not seem possible that a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ can opt out of fellowship with his people, no matter how odd or different they may appear to be.

The place of ‘the collection’ is significant. The Chair of the IATDC, Professor Stephen Sykes, is a notable advocate for differentiating ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ ecclesiology, distinguishing generalised theories about what the church ought to be, from the hard graft of making it clear, in concrete situations, what difference the presence of Jesus might actually make. We could imagine that the tough-minded entrepreneurs of Macedonia and Achaia did not exactly find it easy to divvy up some of their profits to support the idealistic Hebrew Christians in Jerusalem, some of whom seem to have given up work altogether to dream of the imminent return of the Lord. But they did it. Fellowship for them was not a matter of warm feeling for someone they liked, but costly solidarity with people they didn’t actually know, or probably even agree with. Kortright Davis, another member of the Commission, has made a powerful case for what he calls, “ecclesiology from below”: unity at prayer and in the pulpit is invalid if separated from a common purse and identification with the poor. When Peter and Paul extended the right hand of fellowship to each other (Gal 2.9), they were actually bringing into being something that had never even been dreamed of in the long history of the people of God – that when the Messiah came, Jew and Gentile would be one. While there are situations in the New Testament when boundaries have to be drawn (I Peter, Hebrews) or when denial of the Lordship of Christ actually sunders the unity created through his Cross, short of that it is clear that to declare oneself out of communion with another part of God’s church is to diminish the possibility of manifesting his coming kingdom.

Of course the situations with which I began trivialised the issue. An individual’s experience is not to be equated with the relationship between two national churches. If Bishop Kamukwamba stands by his word, I will feel disenfranchised when the Archbishop of Canterbury is not represented as the cathedral dedicates a new learning centre; we will all be impoverished if it is no longer easily possible for vibrant Zambian priests to come and do research in English colleges or share ministry in our inner cities; and if the exchange of money or resources between our churches is not just a matter of simple charity but rather an issue of justice for the world Christian community, then it is not just Africa which will pay the price of a break-down of mutuality and trust. If we cannot share our prosperity with those who need it most, we will be the poorer as a result. As Tom Wright puts it, *koinonia* like *agape*, has money attached.

It is this distortion of the global fellowship which comes to concern me most of all. Philip Jenkins, in his book *The Next Christendom: the coming of global Christianity*(2002) convincingly traces the way in which the centre-of-gravity for world Christianity has decisively moved South. He further warns that our unfamiliarity with the churches of Africa, Asia and Latin America could lead the North to alienate itself from them, and ultimately to define itself against the direction taken by the Christian movement as a whole(p162).

Could that be what is happening now in all the talk about 'breaking communion' with each other? While I regret, and in the end actually question, the right of one bishop to unilaterally break off fellowship with others, may it not be the case that our own unilateral actions in the North have made it exceedingly difficult for Christians in the South to recognise that we are in fact, part of the same family, led by the same Spirit (Rom 8.14)? Conversely it may be that a refusal to contemplate differences that have yet to be fully discussed may actually throw up barricades that will prevent that discussion taking place at all.

My own conviction is, that in times of controversy Christians should hold together in fellowship and face their differences within it. So I will go to Zambia next with sadness in my heart. But I will also remember times when I have been excommunicated before and yet continued to seek ways to make common cause with those from whom I am separated. It happens each Sunday at home when 90% of the baptised Christians in the parish where I normally live and work decline to come to celebrate and communicate with the rest of the people of God. I don't think that this is the direct result of anything we have actually said to each other. But it certainly means in Heighington, and I think in Zambia, that the church is a less than it might be – and I happen to believe also, that our community at least is a less happy place in which to live.

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