

Homily, St. Andrew's  
Sunday, September 28, 2014  
John 17:18-23

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

If there is one overarching theme that runs through our service today, it is unity or oneness. We heard it just a moment ago in our Gospel passage from John when Jesus says as part of his farewell prayer for his disciples: "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one..." I couldn't say if this particular passage was known to be important to 16th century Anglican theological Richard Hooker who we celebrate today, but certainly this prayer of Jesus highlighting the unity that comes with deep connectedness resonates well with Hooker's work. That is undoubtedly why this passage from John is the suggested Gospel for his commemoration. The prayer "... that they may become completely one..." is a prayer that has echoed through the generations any and every time the Church of Christ teeters on the brink of schism.

In the past few weeks we have considered the religious and political tumult out of which the Anglican church was born in the 16th century. Over the course of about 50 years, great frustration with church corruption and other abuses of power along with new theological ideas, political intrigue, economic wrangling and liturgical innovation both reflected vast changes and brought them about in the upper echelons of English society. When Queen Elizabeth came to the throne late in 1558, the appetite for the chaos that such change brings had come to an end and Elizabeth sought to settle her kingdom. Within 6 months, Parliament passed another Act of Uniformity re-instating the English Book of Common Prayer as the standard for worship in English churches along with other changes that became known as Elizabethan Settlement. With that, and with Elizabeth on the throne for the rest of the century, a path of moderate protestantism was set for the Church of England independent from Rome. Finding a "middle way" between catholic and protestant beliefs and practices has been a key marker of Anglicanism ever since.

Richard Hooker was just a small boy when Queen Elizabeth came to the throne and so the Elizabethan Settlement was all he knew. Hooker's life and work are that of the next generation - the generation that follows those at the forefront of conflict and innovation, that shapes and moulds the new way for the long-term and that deals with the extremists in the aftermath of it all. Thomas Cranmer's contribution was on the protestant side of emphasizing biblical literacy; using "the language of the people" for worship; and shifting the understanding of the sacraments. His fight, along with all the protestants of the first half of the century, was against Rome and the Roman Church. In the second half of the century, the fight flip-flopped. While still having to deal with some non-conformist followers of Rome, the primary conflict Hooker dealt with was with the Puritans - the name given to the more extreme protestants and dedicated Calvinists.

My favourite story about Richard Hooker is one that I think exemplifies who he was, the time he lived in and his greatest legacy. It is about his tenure as the Master of the Temple Church in London when for several years, Hooker preached every morning and his Puritan rival Walter Travers preached every afternoon. Now we can't know who was present for all of these sermons or if people just picked which one they liked best and stuck with him, but still... can you even

imagine an organization today that not only allowed but promoted such extended debate between rivals? Imagine Steven Harper and Justin Trudeau giving speeches at the same location - one in the morning, one in the afternoon - for years? Imagine representatives from: Wildrose and NDP, Shell and Greenpeace, ISIS and Amnesty International, Democrat and Republican, Gaza and Israel... debating with words only, however strong, to convince people that their position, their beliefs, are the right ones. Imagine it continuing for years... in one sense, maybe that is how our systems work and yet it seems to me that the kind of reasoned debate, the kind of conflict, between Hooker and Travers, played out in public, is so much healthier than what we do today with 30 second attack ads, soundbites and bombs.

The form that the the debate took between Hooker and Travers - between Establishment and Puritan - is important, but the content of the debate also matters. Once the decision to make an independent English Church separate from Rome was truly settled, the debate became between those who wished much greater Protestant reforms and those who remained more moderate. As the name suggests, the Puritans wanted much greater change, particularly in the form of church governance. They wanted a strict adherence to the Bible as the sole and literal authority in all things ecclesial, and most of all, they wanted to be rid of any and all vestiges of the Roman Catholic Church, not specifically prescribed in scripture.

Hooker had a much more tempered view of both the Roman Church and of Protestant, specifically Calvinist, views. The most acute questions Hooker dealt with were around: who is and who is not "truly," "purely," Christian? What church is the real, or true, church? For many in that time the unity - the one-ness - of the church of Christ was a serious matter. There is one God with one Saviour Jesus Christ, and so there can only be one church. And if a person wanted to be saved, they must belong to that one church. In the immediate aftermath of rather serious schisms in the western church, these questions were acute and fiercely debated. Hooker found his way through with a multi-layered understanding of the church as a politically-ordered society here on earth as well as a supernatural society of divine origin. It is membership in the supernatural society that really determines one's salvation status.

Hooker's understanding of the supernatural aspect of the church is further organized as visible and mystical with the mystical church being the Body of Christ that is only known by God. The visible church, on the other hand, is identified through the sacrament of baptism. He writes: "The unity of which visible body and Church of Christ consisteth in that uniformity which all several persons thereunto belonging have, by reason of that *one Lord* whose servants they all profess themselves, that *one faith* which they all acknowledge, that *one baptism* wherewith they are all initiated. The visible Church of Jesus Christ is therefore *one* in outward profession..." Notice the series of unifying points: one Lord, one faith, one baptism... these unifying points are also among those identified in the ecumenical movement of the late 20th century as connecting points for all manner of Christian churches. Baptism is one point on which broad consensus was reached in the World Council of Churches, and it is why in the Anglican Church we offer communion to any baptized Christian, regardless of denomination or age. If baptism is the mark of full membership in the Body of Christ, then nothing further is required to fully participate.

The deep issue that Hooker is addressing is that of belonging... who belongs to God; who belongs to the church; who is saved; and how do we know? In times of such significant transformation as the Reformation, belonging is one of the key questions. It is a question that is also acute today as so many of the traditional markers of belonging in the Anglican and other mainline protestant denominations have shifted, along with the assumptions that come with

them. For instance, no longer are the majority of people baptized in infancy and so the process of inviting, welcoming, teaching and initiating new members is shifting. Likewise, the behavioural expectations that go along with belonging are also up for grabs. Does a person not belong if they are not baptized and yet attend church regularly and actively participate in the life of a Christian community? Is someone a full member if they were baptized as an infant and yet don't have a meaningful, personal connection to a Christian community? These are among the difficult questions we face in our time and place.

When I think about the ecclesial issues facing us today, what I find most appealing, most encouraging and most impactful about Richard Hooker's work is his thoughtful, measured approach. Hooker was a man of passion and steadfastness, but unlike so many others he was less reactionary and blindly committed to a "side" of the theological debate. His commitment was to the English Establishment, which is something we might now want to critique, but it was also to the unity of the church and one-ness of Christian people. He was unwilling to reject all aspects of the Roman Church just because it was Roman and he was unwilling to accept all aspects of Protestant practice and Calvinist theology. Hooker offers us an amazing example of tempered and thoughtful, prayerful and passionate belief... of faith seeking understanding. It is perhaps his greatest legacy and enduring contribution to our Anglican tradition. As we explore and debate the theological, social and other issues of our time and place, may we seek to follow in his way of generosity of spirit, clarity of thought and commitment to gathering Christian people together "... that they may become completely one..."