

Homily, St. Andrew's
Sunday, November 16, 2014
"Enlightenment: The Dawn of Modernity"

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.

Several years ago, at a meeting about our international partnerships and Anglican mission around the world, I have a distinct memory of a moment that represents an enduring cultural difference I encounter in our church. Then National Director of Partnerships Ellie Johnson, was talking about some issue in Africa when she finally exclaimed in frustration: "Africa used to be getting better! We were so optimistic! Things were getting better... Don't you remember?" It has been the hope and promise of international development for decades, but the reason I remember the moment is that I felt I had to speak up with an alternate point of view. I responded: "No, actually... I don't remember that optimism. In my lifetime, Africa has only ever been getting worse..." It sounds so depressing, I know, and I'm not going to discuss the issue per se because my point is the radical difference in perspective: buoyant optimism vs. potentially crushing pessimism. It is one of the markers of a major cultural shift in the past decades. As we wrap up our fall exploration of Anglican Roots today, I want to consider the impact of the enlightenment and modern thinking on the church, introduce the postmodern shifts of the past decades and put it in the context of mission.

The critical shift known as the Enlightenment began in the 17th century but really came into its own in the 18th. It began in intellectual circles with philosophers like Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes and John Locke challenging the traditional thinking they deemed superstitious to emphasize instead reason and individualism. "I think, therefore I am," is a phrase that summarizes modernity. It was coined by Descartes first in French in 1637 and later in Latin. It was an idea that changed everything because it changed the basis of what it means to be human from a community and faith-based understanding to an individual and intellectual one. The importance of this shift cannot be overstated because of its impact, over the course of the next few centuries, on theology, the church and pretty much everything about western society.

Back in September, I suggested a model of change that described the process as beginning with new ideas being ridiculed, then vigorously opposed, eventually accepted and finally taken as self-evident. The early Enlightenment philosophers of the 17th century were ridiculed and opposed... consider, for instance, the Roman Church's vilification of Galileo, known as the Father of Science, for his support of the Copernican idea that the earth and other planets revolve around the sun, rather than the earth being the centre of the universe, as the Church believed. Galileo was chastised at the Council of Trent in 1616 and then declared a heretic at an inquisition in 1633. There is much more to his story, of course, but what perhaps matters the most in terms of the relationship of church and culture and the changes in both, is that it took until 1992, roughly 350 years, for the Pope to make a declaration expressing regret about how Galileo had been treated by the Church. The Roman church had more or less accepted modernity with Vatican 2 in the 1960's but still, that was a good 200 years later than many others in the Western world. Quite ironically, it came as modern times were coming to an end.

The Enlightenment and the modern world that followed were preeminently the "Age of Reason" - "I think, therefore, I am." The development of the empirical method meant that the world became the object of scientific study, rather than a divine-infused creation. The world became divided between subjects and objects - those deemed human were the subjects who could

objectively and dispassionately study the objects around them. This is why it mattered whether women, or people of colour, were considered human or not... who is a subject and what are the objects? The implications were far-reaching. In the Enlightenment, we stopped considering totality, wholeness or integration and instead analyzed parts: biology, physiology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, chemistry, physics, politics... and the list goes on. Questions of purpose were overshadowed by the seeking of simple cause and effect through the “natural” laws that govern all of life. Once complete knowledge of these laws was achieved, then... well... utopia.

Further, progress became a core belief. Technological development or modernization were the primary methods of solving the world’s problems... problems that were all in principle solvable. This came because of the great modern confidence in the autonomous, free, individual and the belief that knowledge is solely factual, value-free and neutral. If only we progress away from superstition, myth, and the supernatural, in favour of that which can be empirically studied and proven, then we will be saved by the incredible ability of humankind. Modernity had great faith in humankind and was unfailingly optimistic about our capacity to solve problems. No mystery, no uncertainty, no doubt... just reason and science driving us along the road of progress... this is the way to salvation.

In all this, Christian faith, God, and the church didn’t disappear, of course, but rather went through that process of adaptation: ridicule, opposition, and acceptance until many approaches finally became self-evident. As such, modern values and beliefs were gradually incorporated into how Christian faith was believed and practiced. The impact is particularly important in the Protestant world as many protestant churches were born in the wake of the Enlightenment and take its precepts as self-evident. Our place “in the middle” between Catholic and Protestant matters greatly, particularly in that the Anglican Church has roots more ancient than modernity. It’s one of the reasons I’ve wanted us to spend time with that history.

With the advent of modernity, critical biblical and theological study flourished and remains threatening to many. The importance of scientifically provable facts is clearly evident in the use of archeology and a variety of other disciplines to “prove” everything from literal 7-day creation to finding Noah’s ark to which words Jesus actually spoke. The primacy of reason is apparent in the pursuit of systematic theology and apologetics as theologians sought to make faith about facts. Alternatively, some churches, particularly in protestant evangelical circles, turned from reason altogether, making religion primarily about feelings and individual experience. The belief in progress continues to be apparent in approaches that say if we just use modern music and modern words in our worship... if we get all the individual parts correct, we will cause the effect that we want. There was a time, not so long ago, that it worked.

But times have changed. I have heard my colleagues talk about it, saying: “I know how to grow a church... I’ve done it... but things that used to work don’t anymore.” There is such befuddlement about it. For me, though, I’ve always experienced a disjuncture of being from a different culture. Let me explain by way of a quote from the 1996 book *A Primer on Postmodernism* by Stanley Grenz. He begins: “Postmodernism was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on July 15, 1972, at 3:32pm. When it was originally built, the Priutt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis was hailed as a landmark of modern architecture. More importantly, it stood as the epitome of modernity itself in its goal of employing technology to create a utopian society for the benefit of all. But its unimpressed inhabitants vandalized the buildings. Government planners put a lot of effort into attempts to renovate the project. But finally, having sacrificed millions of dollars to the project, the government planners gave up. On that fateful afternoon in mid-July 1972, the building was razed with dynamite...” (p 11)

On that day in St. Louis, the optimism of the modern world was blown up. I was born a year and a half later... so my homeland is not one of optimism in progress, or belief in value-free and neutral facts, or faith that starts with reason. The cultural difference that I have always lived with in the church is of a different thought world or paradigm... I am not a modern person, I am a postmodern one. And while those words have been bandied about for some time now, decades actually, the actual change has only really occurred in the past 10 years or so. I'm convinced it's the reason for the frustration among my modern colleagues from whom I've heard the lament: "it doesn't work anymore."

The Anglican Church spread around the world because there was a priest on every boat that left England. In the building of an empire, Church of England priests were sent to bring comfort to those settling in new places and eventually to bring light of Christianity to the dark minds of backward places. Mission, in modern times, was largely about saving people from the sin of ignorance. One of the things we need to re-think in church now is about what mission means. What does it mean to be a missional church today? I think it has to do with connecting with people who are not like us, who don't come with our set of assumptions, beliefs and values by going out to listen deeply to their needs, stories and experiences. This connection is not about trying to impose our way but rather discovering what God is already doing and participating in that... participating in God's mission that is already underway. To do so, we need to bring with us the best of who we are and who we have been - the best of our history and tradition and examples from the saints who have gone before us. And we need to have the courage to let go of the rest. As we do, may we see God's salvation at work in individual lives, in our church, and in the world and may we too come to know God in new and exciting ways.