

Celebration LINK

May 2005

Conservative or liberal?

Modern debates in the church seem to force us to be one or the other

It is sometimes hard to avoid the impression that the world is becoming more and more polarised with every year that passes. The church is no exception to this; in fact, one might well say that it is *especially* true of the church.

Just a few weeks ago we had the spectacle of the Anglican Primates' meeting coming perilously close to tearing the Communion apart over the issue of homosexuality. It may yet happen. Then there was the election of a new Pope, controversial because of his hardline conservative reputation on a range of issues.

Of course, there is also a wider social and political background. Internationally we have seen the acceptance of the free market economy, with its generally conservative political outlook (even when styled as 'Labour'), which tends to reflect western values and looks towards the United States as its centre of gravity. Reaction to this in the form of Islamic fundamentalism has simply had the effect of reinforcing it.

The result, especially in America,

is a kind of marriage between religious and political conservatism which led George Bush to declare that America had 'a calling from beyond the stars' to export its brand of freedom and democracy.

Freedom, however, is not an unqualified value for conservatives. At a deeper level than the political currents of our time has been the deep shift in consciousness that goes by the name of Postmodernism. A loss of objectivity means that 'truth' is seen not as an absolute but to depend on one's point of view. Use of language has come under scrutiny, because it conveys an impression of objectivity but needs to be stripped of gender and racial bias.

These developments, generally happening in a much less public way than the political news, have underpinned movements such as feminism and helped create the climate for legitimising homosexuality. It is at this point that conservatives wish to draw the line, so that, for example, whilst promoting freedom and democracy, Mr. Bush also wants to ban gay marriage.

The church has been very deeply affected by the postmodernist

debate because, whether we like it or not, we cannot avoid its effect in our lives. Indeed, the effect is often shown in the debates themselves.

The conservative objection to postmodernism is that loss of objectivity undermines the notion of a moral absolute on which God's laws depend. But that position itself is subject to the spirit of the age. Where truth depends on one's point of view, my point of view is as good as yours, which means that the way to resolve things is more likely to be through power struggles or splits.

That, in fact, is what often happens. Ultimately, it may lead to a marriage of religious and political ideas that proves to be a toxic brew, or it can lead to a religious fundamentalism characterised more by exclusiveness and intolerance than by any real sense of God's presence. And, lest the reader think that this is solely a comment about conservatism in the church, liberals are just as subject to the same pressures.

For example, one of the reasons the appointment of Bishop Gene Robinson in the United States

A Spring visit to Aliquippa

In April this year Phil & Margaret Bradshaw made one of their regular visits to the Community at Aliquippa. The purpose was partly to attend meetings of the SCC UK Council, but also to have some relaxed time.

While there Margaret was able to participate in the emerging women's ministry which takes place a couple of times a week. A group of women from the local gaol are brought to the community where they learn basic skills such as sewing or cooking. In some cases they have very little skill at all, yet the team are often surprised and delighted



Women's ministry sewing project

by the standard of work produced. The women are very open about their situation and love to join in their own mid-day prayers in the community chapel.

The seemingly relaxed atmosphere of this ministry belies the fact that such programmes do cost money. The community has received some donations but has also been seeking grants. This procedure is time consuming and usually results in many rejections before an ap-



Alison Stanley (right) prepares material for a quilting exercise.

plication is successful. Nevertheless, some funding has already been secured and efforts are continuing to achieve the level necessary to expand facilities.

During this visit, Phil was able to work on his book project and also to prepare an article on the community for publi-

cation in the magazine *Benedictines*, published by the Benedictine sisters of St Scholastica in Kansas. Material already written for another purpose required only a little 'tweaking', but it was another opportunity to widen awareness of the community.

In addition to a trip up to the Amish country around New Wilmington, Margaret & Phil also accompanied Steven



Steven & Phil outside the church at which Steven serves in Steubenville, Ohio.

McKeown on a visit to parish churches at Steubenville and East Liverpool, where he serves as a supply priest. It was good to spend an extended time with one of the parishioners, who showed us round, and to get a feel of the parish work as Steven took communion to the elderly.

In previous issues we have reported on the Church Army's project, led by John



Bill Farra, May McKeown and Margaret Bradshaw at the cafe project in downtown Aliquippa.

Stanley, to establish a cafe and community centre. Despite delays, the cafe is now nearing completion, and we were able to get a foretaste of coffee and lunch there. What had been a dark, derelict building has been transformed into a bright gathering place (see picture). Local people, who have nowhere much to go, are eager to see it open.

Another project which the community have been very busy with this Spring is All Saints House, the name given to the



Community 'eleveners' time in the lounge.

property next door to the community offices which was bought by a community friend, Maggie Durran. In anticipation of its use for conferences and retreats, much of the lower floors has already been transformed with new bedroom, bathroom and kitchen facilities.

Maggie has also worked on the strip of land between All Saints and the office, turning it into a flower garden (picture). Many people have commented on it, although unfortunately the fence is necessary to prevent flowers being picked, which can happen in unfenced areas.



Flower garden of All Saints House

Part of the reason for this trip was, of course, community business. We spent time together discussing a range of issues, including the increasing use of the internet, the continuing requests for some kind of history or evaluation of our community movement, writing projects, the special issues that arise in working with outside trustees. We also discussed plans for the whole community to visit Elmore Abbey in the autumn, and the Bradshaws' emerging ideas for the future direction of their ministry.



The memorial service for Susan Abbott at St John's Redhill.

Susan Abbott

1936 - 2005

Susan died on 19th February, after a long illness.

I first met Susan at Post Green. What especially attracted me to her was her faith story. Our own journey had begun as a call to live by faith, and I was eager to explore the substance of it. Susan had learned that in a good school, and that was the foundation of her ministry. To me, it also sums up the person that she was.

She came to faith through living in a household of Christian students at university. It was a typically hand to mouth existence, but in the midst of it she learned about God's faithfulness. For example, she had an old car named Lazarus (because it was always having to be resurrected!). She had also learned to tithe, and was supporting a Navajo Indian lady. One day, Lazarus died yet again, and she didn't have the money to both get it repaired *and* send her donation. She had just decided she would have to get the car fixed, when it started again – so she sent off her cheque. Next day, the car failed once more, which, she said, gave her a cringe



Susan in conference ministry at Post Green, with Jerry Barker and Tom Lees

in the pit of her stomach. But then, lo and behold, a mechanic fixed it "for a pittance".

She said that that taught her about trusting God at the point of her fear. Susan, by her own testimony, had never lived a conventional Christian life, at least by the standards of middle class, church going America. Brought up in a non-Christian home, her later

experience of God she described as an evolving relationship in which God spoke through the circumstances of everyday life. The words which God spoke were not directions to do this or that, but broad redemptive words with profound significance in the substance of everyday living.

She and her husband Gordon were living close to the University of Houston when they joined the Church of the Redeemer. They were asked to move, leaving all their furniture behind, into a small flat



nearer the church. Susan was pregnant, anaemic, and unable to work, while Gordon was the parish administrator. The system was that tithes went towards basic parish running costs, while the needs of additional ministers came from "love offerings".

There came a point when there was no money, not enough food to feed a family and a shortage of washing powder in a house with two babies in nappies. Susan marched down to the church to find out how much money had been allocated to them from love offerings. Gordon made a show of looking it up but probably knew the answer: it was \$20. Susan went home feeling angry, but when she arrived, there was a great grocery sack and a large, king size box of Tide – enough to feed a household for a week and do the laundry. She was, she said, not so much thankful as awestruck.

It was through this and many such experiences that Susan learned a different attitude to life, overcoming the need to be like other people. Instead of *only* having 25 cents to spend, 25 cents was the *first sign* of God's favour to which would be added good things from

many other sources – a bargain here, a bit of surplus food there, a gift from a friend, an unexpected money donation.

In her English community days, Susan was legendary for her ability to sniff out useful bargains, to make food stretch to feed many mouths and to come up with resources for any kind of need. Resourcefulness was her middle name! But it was for her pastoral counselling skills that she was most well known outside the community.

She brought to it that same quality of faith that she had learned in her early days in Houston. That was her real secret: her ability to see a person, not as they were but as they would be. It was a remarkable gift. People will always remember her for her ready smile, her warm acceptance and good humour and her perceptive and often penetrating comments.

When she left Post Green, it became necessary, as part of the financial support of the community at Bletchingley, for her to operate professionally. After qualifying at South West London College, this was her bread and butter work for a number of years. She also travelled, took a full part in the community's outreach ministry, and was



Susan at a meeting with Sr. Joan Chittister

much valued in conversations with other Christian leaders for her wisdom and experience.

Gordon's death in 1999 was a blow. By that time, Susan already knew that her own health problems were more serious than had at first appeared. The next few years saw a gradual deterioration which she bore with great dignity, patience and good humour. Her memorial service at St John's Redhill was attended by a large congregation, some of whom had travelled from overseas. She will be greatly missed by all who knew her.

Phil Bradshaw

caused so much offence was because it was widely perceived to be a political manoeuvre, short circuiting debate by getting a gay bishop appointed.

True or not, it illustrates the dilemma for the modern church. In the absence of a universally accepted absolute, even those who believe in an absolute have no place to stand. Religion being what it is, it sets the stage for extreme polarisation where, on many sensitive subjects, one can hardly say anything without mortally offending somebody.

Pilate's famous question, 'What is truth?' seems strangely apt today. The Pope, it is said, favours a smaller church of the committed, which perhaps is the conservative answer. Others look with horror at the suggestion of a return to a confessional church, which excludes all but those who are able to sign up to the required tenets.

But Jesus, in his interaction with Pilate, made it clear he is the *living* truth. Insofar as words like 'conservative' or 'liberal' have any meaning in the life of the Son of God, he embodies them both. What his followers need to do is to get beyond the cerebral debates about doctrines, policies and convictions, and get to the heart of the *Spirit* of Jesus.

In the story of the woman taken in adultery, Jesus says both 'neither do I condemn you', and 'go and sin no more'. In a nutshell, both sides of the argument are there. He quotes scripture, liberally and with effect, yet he also

berates those who use it to develop systems and doctrines, laws and practices, which control people and deny them access to the grace of God. To those who insist on conformity to God's law, he puts forward a law that is too tough for any of us, like the law on divorce or the saying that we commit adultery just by thinking about it. To those who deny the resurrection, he says 'You're wrong. You don't understand the power of God'.

The dilemma today is that, for all the fine words that are uttered in church circles, there is not a lot of room for the Spirit of Jesus. All too often religious disputes, whether doctrinal, moral or socio/political, are seen in terms of power struggles. Questions become issues of power, rights and privileges: who has them, who doesn't have them, and who has a right to have them.

The Spirit of Jesus is about laying down power, not about claiming it. It is about listening, not about asserting. It is about enduring, not about refusing and rebelling. It is about the unity of faith, not about protecting positions or interests.

Here, conservatives and liberals (if we simply use those words loosely, to cover a whole range of polarities) need to listen deeply to each other, for both are part of the church. The conservative spirit is in many ways the engine room of religion. It is that which keeps tradition alive, preserves core values, takes God and his word seriously, and provides

much of the commitment of lives necessary to further the work of the church. The liberal spirit is open to possibility, softening the demands of dogma and acting as a force for inclusiveness.

In a polarised world there is little room for both. The church is either a homogenous group of committed believers or an amorphous collection with no real core beliefs. Jesus' picture of the kingdom of God as a tree, hospitable to the birds of the air, suggests something different.

The church does not need committed believers in the sense of those fully signed up to traditional beliefs and practices. It needs people willing to be the living truth, as Jesus was. Such people internalise God's word and make room for others, not because they have a doctrine about it but because they are spiritual beings in the mould of Jesus.

In community it is difficult to be either a conservative or a liberal. Thus the witness of communities and vowed lives is extremely important today, even though it is easy to feel powerless in the face of movements in the church nationally and internationally.

In the face of Pilate's (very modern) question 'What is truth?' there is only one real answer: to be the truth. That will only happen as people of very different persuasions give themselves to God and to each other in love, and that is what we must pray for.

Phil Bradshaw