

GENERAL SYNOD

You may remember the red queen in Alice was in the habit of thinking 6 impossible things before breakfast. I thought I would have a similar go this evening before supper and our reading from Jeremiah [26:1-15] falls in quite happily with the events of General Synod this month.

Firstly, when bishops are consecrated they are required to have a special care for the unity of the church. This in a nutshell explains why Archbishop Rowan goes to enormous lengths, sometimes perhaps against his private views, to hold the wide spectrum of Anglican belief together.

Secondly, the Anglo-Catholic end of the Anglican communion believe that women can be neither priests nor bishops because, in a nutshell, Jesus was a man and all the apostles were men. The church was built upon Peter and he was a man.

Thirdly, they believe that not only can a bishop not ordain a woman, but in order to preserve what they call sacramental assurance, any bishop who has ever ordained a woman is unacceptable and in fifty years no-one will know who was ordained by whom and the line of sacramental authority, which started with Peter laying his hands on his successor will be broken. The reformation makes no difference here, because the Pope laid hands on the archbishop, who laid hands on the bishop etc etc and the fact it was the church of England makes no difference from it being the church of Rome.

Fourthly, the conservative evangelicals at the other end of the spectrum believe that women cannot be priests, vicars, deans or hold any positions of authority, let alone be bishops because Paul in one of his letters to Timothy says that he does not permit this.

Fifthly, it is necessary to grasp the difference between delegation and transfer. Each bishop has autonomy in his diocese. It is therefore unacceptable to any bishop to lose that autonomy, but the point at which it is lost depends.

Sixthly, the revision committee sat for a year, perused the draft legislation (“the measure”) and brought it to General Synod with the draft statutory code, the subject of the last row in synod in July 2008 when “statutory” was voted into the measure so that the code is now part of the measure and not a bolt-on extra.

Seventhly (yes I know the Red Queen stopped at six) Synod members are as sick of this debate as any and the vote that women should be bishops, clause 1 of the measure, was carried without debate.

Alas, the amendments to clauses two to nine of the measure ran to thirty-seven pages.

Holding firmly onto delegation and transfer, we look at clause 2. The Anglo-Catholics want a home of their own, completely separate dioceses. Any bishop in a geographical diocese would therefore be faced with enclaves where a parish did not look to him or her, but a bishop elsewhere. This means no autonomy and this amendment was lost by 258 votes to 134.

The Evangelicals wanted a system not unlike the existing flying bishops, where a parish could ask to opt out and be given a complementary bishop, the diocesan bishop would transfer (there’s that word again) some of his or functions to that bishop. Transfer means loss of autonomy and this too was voted out, being lost in the three houses of bishops, clergy and laity.

The Archbishops looked at the words of clause 2 “the diocesan bishop shall by means of delegation (the other word) to a nominated bishop” and put in an amendment removing “by means of delegation”. This would mean in essence parallel jurisdictions in a diocese. As someone said, it’s all right when the diocesan and the nominated bishop are getting on, but what happens when they don’t? The fact that it was the archbishops putting in the amendment put everyone in an awkward position. We like to do what the archbishops suggest. The anglo-

catholics said it was enough to keep them in the church of England (although it is worth noting that it did not, in fact, give them what they had been asking for) the evangelicals were OK with it. Unfortunately not everyone else was. The steering committee the ones who steered through the measure, had not had time to examine it and what discussions they had had did not persuade them this would work. Although the archbishops said it would not cause delay, it seemed to many that the only way to deal with this amendment was to send the whole measure back to be revised again, which would mean a delay of at least another year. There was a vote and the amendment was passed by the House of Bishops, although it was very significant that fifteen bishops voted against and it was passed in the House of Laity. In the house of Clergy it was rejected, ninety against, 85 for and 5 abstentions. There was an audible gasp when the figures were read out. If the vote had not been by houses, the amendment would have passed since more voted for it than against it, but because it failed in one house, it failed altogether.

This was not the happiest of situations.

Nevertheless, the archbishops said firmly that the amendment was not a loyalty test and Synod went back to work on a hot, sticky afternoon. All that had in fact happened was that the draft legislation remained the favoured vehicle and attempts to amend it failed. One further amendment was put forward that removed the whole of the clause and left the simple words "there shall be woman bishops". This would have meant no provision at all in any form for those of other minds, but this amendment also fell, the proponents of women bishops agreeing that whatever the legislation should be, concessions were both graceful and loving. In fact that was the pattern was the whole of the debate. All the amendments fell and the draft was left intact. Many clauses went through uncontested.

Jeremiah the prophet said to those accusing him that he was speaking as God told him. We do not know for certain what happened to him in the end, but it is reasonably likely that eventually he was put to death. We are asking General Synod to be a prophet for our times. The message is often difficult and hard to accept. The clergy from Exeter diocese consist of two members of Forward in Faith , the anglo-catholics and the leader of Reform, the conservative evangelicals. And me. The laity consist of two women who do not agree with women priests and two men and a woman who do. But we are still able to take Home communion together and we all went out to dinner together on the last night, assisted by the bishop, who was paying and we had a pleasant time.

What we do not want is for Synod to speak but as in the general election, to have little understanding or acceptance of what it said.

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25.7.10