

Apostle to Overseer to Bishop to Vicar
Epiphany 3, Year C
1 Corinthians 12: 12-30
24 January 2009

In the Church, God has given the first place to apostles, the second to prophets, the third to teachers; after them, miracles, and after them the gift of healing; helpers, good leaders, those with many languages.

From time to time members of informal churches wave their floppy Bibles in front of Anglicans and tell them that their orders of ministry can't be found in the New Testament, and cite passages like the one I have just read out. There are a couple of quick-witted replies Anglicans could make to this – such as, “Since Pastor Brian Tamaki appointed himself a Bishop Anglicans find themselves in good company” – or, “So you have prophets, miracle workers and faith healers on tap at your Church, maybe I should come along next Sunday with my medical shopping list.” But there is a more considered answer Anglicans can give to explain how they got to Bishops, Priests and Deacons from Apostles, Prophets and Teachers, and this morning I intend to give it.

1 Corinthians 12 reflects the on the ground reality in the first generation of the Church's life. The Apostles are itinerants constantly on the move founding churches, and then coming back from time to time to check up on how they are doing. To keep things going while they are away they appoint someone local who is dependable, reliable, and who is stable in their personal life, and in their Christian maturity. Our translation of the Greek New Testament used for this role would be “overseer.”

The overseer is a cross between our idea of a Churchwarden and a locum priest who looks after a parish while it is between Vicars. They are not expected to make any big changes, just to keep things on an even keel.

Over time the Apostles die out, and slowly but surely the overseers become more important. There have been challenges to the authentic faith of the Church. One way of dealing with the problem is to recognise certain texts that have been circulating around the churches as authoritative books that from now on will be a fresh enlargement of Scripture, to be known as the New Testament. The other is to task the overseers, now increasingly referred to as Bishops, to define what Christian truth is, to set the standard at local level, and to be the recognised and authoritative teachers of that orthodox Christian faith. In other words they have now taken over the Apostles job as interpreters of the faith.

The other thing that Bishops do that makes their role grow is to celebrate the Eucharist each Sunday, and to preach at it. They alone do this. Christianity is an overwhelmingly urban phenomenon at this stage. All Christians in that city will come to one place on a Sunday, usually a large private house, remember there are no churches then, where the Bishop presides over the only Eucharist that will be celebrated that day. This is of huge significance for the way the Church would come to understand what Bishops are for, and how the Eucharist makes the Church happen. I will come back to this later.

All of this took a while to happen. The transition time is called the tunnel period, so-called because we know what went in one end of the tunnel, and we know what came out the other end of the tunnel,

but we don't know much about what happened in the change time in the tunnel. What we can say is that by the second half of the second century Bishops rule and lead the Church in decisive ways everywhere.

The Deacons, who are part social workers, part pastoral workers, and part administrators, help them in this. Their servant role is reflected in their setting the table role at the Eucharist. They also take the sacrament from the Eucharist to those who couldn't get to the liturgy. I will come back to the Deacons later.

By now prophets have died out. Often they used to wander from Church to Church plying their trade. We heard about them at last year's Agape banquet when we celebrated the Eucharist according to Didache, and heard the tough hospitality rules about Church guests who stay too long without doing very much. They lasted longer than the Apostles, but now they are off the scene.

The conversion of the Roman Empire, and the sudden massive expansion of the Church, brings about big changes in the Church's ministry. Now there are too many Christians to gather in one place at one time for the Eucharist. So a fateful invention takes place – the creation of the parish. Out of the shadows emerge the Presbyters, whom we now call Priests, who were helping the Bishop lead Services, and who now do that on their own, in a particular parish Church, on behalf of, and in the place of the Bishop. There were gains and losses in this development.

Bishops are now important officials in the Roman Empire, with civic responsibilities. They have also got wider responsibilities outside their local areas.

Only they attend the big oecumenical Councils at Nicea, Constantinople and Chalcedon to sort out major doctrinal disputes, and to define the faith of the Church in what we now call the creeds. As the Roman Empire collapses, and as the Christian faith spreads in to Northern Europe, Bishops often become useful civil servants to Kings, and they often now preside over geographically large Dioceses containing hundreds of parishes. From the Middle Ages on they are often too busy to have much contact with parishes or with their clergy, and so the independence of the parish priests quietly grows.

The Reformation in England didn't change much in this equation. The Bishops were now usually married, they were chosen by the King rather than elected by the Diocese or selected by the Pope, they were supposed to confirm often, and to make sure that the confirmands had learned the catechism, but they were still remote from the life of the parishes and their clergy. So along came another fateful development – the Parson's freehold. Once a Vicar was properly instituted into his parish he was in for life if he so chose. He could only be winkled out if it could be proved that he was guilty of gross immorality or heresy. The Church had travelled quite some distance from seeing the Presbyter as the Bishop's local representative.

When Anglicanism transplanted itself to these shores some of these unhelpful developments were modified. Lay people were brought in to the decision-making life of the Church through Synods and Vestries, and often they were allowed a say in the choosing of their Vicars. Bishop Selwyn saw that this would have to happen as, unlike the Church of England, the lay people would have to pay for the running of the Church. This meant that lay

people could force unpopular Vicars to move simply by withholding their giving. New Zealand Diocese's were smaller than their English equivalents, the Bishops didn't have to attend the House of Lords, and Bishops had more frequent contact with their people through the annual Diocesan Synod and clergy school. However there will still some fundamental structural theological problems in all this, and they have yet to be resolved.

The progression from Apostles, Prophets and Teachers to Bishops, Priests and Deacons was a legitimate development, as can be seen from the fact that the Orthodox churches, the ancient Oriental churches, the Roman Catholic church, and some branches of Lutheranism order themselves in this way. But as a growing tide of theological opinion sees it Episcopacy was at its healthiest back at that early stage when the Bishop defined and taught the apostolic faith, and celebrated the Church's Eucharist. The Bishop's key role is to exercise godly leadership in that part of the Church committed to their care, to maintain wise discipline within its fellowship, to promote peace and unity among God's people, and to keep the Church true to its faith. I am quoting from our ordinal – and it is there on the front cover of the Grapevine. The other roles that got tacked on in later ages distracted Bishops from doing and being this, and were not helpful. The problem is that if Bishops give up being administrators, organisers and sitting on endless committees, who will do this vital work? But as the Windsor report pointed out, one of the reasons things have gone wrong in the Anglican Communion is that Bishops have not emphasised their key role as teachers and interpreters of the Scriptures – this is what really matters.

And it would be very difficult to get back to the ideal of the Bishop being the sole celebrant of the Church's Sunday Eucharist – how could we get our diocese's small enough – and how could we overcome the disunity that means that often there are several different denominational Bishops in one city? But when this ideal is sacrificed we see the growth of the, "I'm the King of the castle" attitude amongst Vicars, and of parishes thinking that they can pull up the drawbridge against their Diocese. Somehow we have got to get back to the team player attitude amongst parish clergy, and their parishes, to see themselves united in mission and ministry under the guidance and leadership of their Bishop. The more the Bishops define themselves as the prime celebrants of the Eucharist that generates the life of the Church, the more they will discourage unhelpful individualism amongst priests and parishes, and the more they will enhance the catholicity of the Church.

Deacons in our time are staging a heroic come back fight against having their ministries shrunk to being trainee Priests. Clearly something has gone wrong here. It is proving to be something of an uphill struggle to revive their original role. Others have become the administrators now, and there are a wide variety of lay pastoral workers. Also there is the sheer inertia of a system that has over emphasised priesthood. I suspect that the Diaconate won't be recovered until Bishops have re-discovered the wonder and the power of their primal role.

We then are members of a Church that has ordered itself after the mind of Christ, but we have a way to go before we get to quite what he intended.