

Christ and Saint Luke's Episcopal Church
The Second Sunday After Pentecost
Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Faith Seeking Reason

The Rev. Dr. Patrick S. Cheng
June 11, 2023

Good morning. What a blessing it is to be here on this Anglican Heritage Sunday! When Fr. Noah first invited me to preach some six months ago, I was excited to learn that Christ and Saint Luke's had an annual tradition of honoring its Anglican, or English, heritage.

Such a tradition makes sense, of course, because The Episcopal Church is an 18th century offshoot from the Church of England. It also makes sense because the Episcopal Church is a member of the global Anglican Communion, which is headquartered in London.

Now some of you might be looking at me and thinking, "He doesn't look very Anglican or English – why is he preaching today?"

Well, looks can be deceiving. First, I was born in Hong Kong, which was a British colony from 1842 until 1997. Although I immigrated with my family to the United States at a young age and eventually became a U.S. citizen, I actually entered this world as a British subject.

Second, I recently served as the Theologian in Residence at St. Thomas Church Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. For those of you who don't know, Saint Thomas is a bastion of Anglican heritage in New York City. Its rector is from England, and the parish is fond of hosting events like its recent special evensong in thanksgiving for the coronation of King Charles III. I certainly learned a lot about Anglicanism during my time there.

Third, I teach Anglican Studies as a theology professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

So I do have a few things to say about our shared Anglican heritage!

* * *

Now what comes to mind when you hear the word "Anglican"? I don't know about you, but I think of things like the Royal Family, afternoon tea at Harrods, choral evensong at Westminster Abbey, and – of course – the recent coronation of King Charles III and Queen Camilla.

I wouldn't be surprised if you came up with some of these same things. But as a professor of theology, I'd also like to suggest that an important dimension of our Anglican

heritage is *theological* in nature. That is, a key aspect of Anglicanism is the role that *reason* plays in theological reflection.

What do I mean by reason? Well, one of the things that I've always loved about being Episcopalian is that I don't have to check my brain at the door. I've always felt comfortable asking questions about my faith, and I've always felt that the church respected scholarship and the life of the mind.

I experienced this first-hand yesterday, when I spent over six hours on a retreat with around fifty members of the parish and its friends. I was so impressed by the curiosity and intellectual excitement of those who wanted to discuss the intersections of Christianity and the LGBTQ+ experience – something that has created a lot of tension in the diverse body that is the Anglican Communion.

* * *

But I was equally impressed by the deep faith of those who were present yesterday. I was particularly struck by this in light of today's scripture readings, which all relate in some way to the question of faith.

In our first reading from the Book of Genesis, we hear about Abraham, who was called by God at the age of seventy-five to leave his homeland and to build a completely new life in another land.

Can you imagine uprooting your life like that at the age of seventy-five? I'm not even fifty-five, and that sounds terrifying to me. But Abraham trusted in God as a matter of faith, and it was because of this faith that we have the three Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam today.

We also hear about faith in our epistle reading from the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans. This passage is actually a commentary on Abraham's faith and how he inherited the world not through the law, but through the "righteousness of faith." According to St. Paul, Abraham "grew strong in his faith" and he was "fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised." We, too, are called to this kind of faith with respect to the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Finally, we hear about faith in our reading from the Gospel According to St. Luke. First, we hear about St. Matthew, who left his job as a tax collector on the basis of his faith in Jesus. Jesus said "Follow me," and that's exactly what Matthew did.

We also hear about a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years and who touched the fringe of Jesus' cloak in the hopes of being healed. She was in fact healed, and Jesus explained to her: "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well."

It's no surprise, therefore, that faith is the starting point in our lives as Christians. This is *the* key insight of the great theologians through the centuries such as St. Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Karl Barth.

But while faith may be the starting point, it should not be the last word. The traditional definition of theology is “*fides quaerens intellectum*,” which is Latin for “faith seeking reason.” In other words, theology begins with faith, or *fides*. But it does not end there. Theology is always seeking, or *quaerens*, a deeper understanding through reason, or *intellectum*.

Put somewhat differently, we do not study theology in order to believe. Rather, we study theology because we *already* believe. Faith is the starting point for theological reflection. And because we have faith, we want to learn more about the content of our faith. And it is through reason that we are able to do this. In other words, we are called to love God not only with our hearts and our souls, but also with our minds. And that is a very special part of our Anglican heritage.

* * *

So let us return to the question of our Anglican theological heritage. As you may know, each of the major Christian traditions have their “great” theologians. The Lutherans have Martin Luther. The Presbyterians have John Calvin. The Roman Catholics have Thomas Aquinas. And we Anglicans have Richard Hooker.

Richard Hooker was a priest and a theologian during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. The goal of his 16th century theological masterpiece, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, was to defend the Anglican liturgical and ecclesiastical tradition from the Puritans. (I suspect that Thanksgiving probably comes to mind when you hear the word “Puritans,” but think of them as the equivalent of modern-day fundamentalists.)

The Puritans had argued that what Anglicans did in church – for example, using The Book of Common Prayer and recognizing the office of bishops – was unbiblical and therefore forbidden. Hooker, however, used the concept of reason to counter the Puritans’ arguments.

Hooker believed that we must use reason and our God-given minds to interpret the Bible. Just because something is in the Bible doesn’t mean that it is required for all time. Take, for example, the Levitical laws on animal sacrifice. Just because the Ancient Israelites followed these laws didn’t mean that they were binding on 16th century Anglicans.

And just because something is not in the Bible doesn’t mean that it is forbidden. Take the liturgical seasons or feasts such as Advent or Lent. Just because they aren’t mentioned in the Bible doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t celebrate them.

Dr. Kathryn Tanner, a professor at Yale Divinity School and an Episcopalian, has written a thought-provoking essay entitled “Hooker and the New Puritans.” According to Tanner, Hooker can be a helpful resource in terms of contemporary debates over issues such as same-sex marriage. For Tanner, the “New Puritans” are those Christians today who engage in biblical interpretation without taking seriously the use of reason.

* * *

As I mentioned earlier, what I love the most about the Anglican tradition is not having to check your mind at the door. Like our Protestant siblings, we Anglicans love the Bible. And like our Roman Catholic siblings, we Anglicans love Church tradition. But we are able to avoid the extremes of scriptural fundamentalism on the one hand and infallible papal authority on the other because of the gift of reason.

Faith, as we heard in today's readings, must be the starting point of what it means to be a Christian. But faith should not be the last word. We study theology *because* we have faith, and *because* we want to learn more about that faith. And it is through the God-given gift of reason that we are able to do this.

Anglicans take reason very seriously. And that, for me, is what is so special about Anglican Heritage Sunday.