

The Vicar's Letter

Dear Friends,

Alert participants in our 8 am Communion Services on Sundays (and I'm sure all the congregation is alert – perhaps sometimes more than I am!) will have noticed that when I offer the General Intercession I usually pray by name not only for 'Anthony and John, our bishops', but also for 'Rowan, our Archbishop'. I know this is unusual, but it is something I care deeply about.

I started this practice of praying for the Archbishop of Canterbury by name in public worship during the time of Archbishop George Carey. At that time it seemed to me that he got very unfair treatment from the press – even including the ecclesiastical press. There sometimes seemed to be an element of snobbery about how he was written about, or implications that were made. I felt then – and do now – that an Archbishop's position makes him very vulnerable, and having a 'thick skin' is not often an accompaniment to having a pastoral heart. So I decided that the appropriate thing to do was to pray for him, and to encourage congregations to do so too. It is all too easy to criticise, or even to enjoy snide or spiteful comments made about people in public positions. I think that prayer is a great way to check these tendencies in ourselves – to put ourselves back into a level position before God with those whose weaknesses are paraded, pointed up – or even made up – by commentators. We do have differences within the Christian community, even criticisms to make of our leaders, but these are best handled in love and due humility before the face of the Almighty, and not with mud-slinging or snickering hostility.

When Rowan Williams became Archbishop of Canterbury, I, like many people, greeted his appointment with delight. I felt that here was a man of such transparent spirituality and such deep theological scholarship that he would unfailingly command respect from Christians who were serious about their faith. Unfortunately, of course, the press does not deal in theological profundity or spiritual integrity; it works on a stage where all actors have to appear wearing rather obvious 'labels' and taking one side or another in shallow conflict. Whilst it seemed absurd to many of us, Rowan, with his deep attachment to the Fathers of the Church and his orthodox faith, was promptly labelled by the newspapers as a 'liberal' on the basis of one issue only. He was pushed into a box as though he was a mere moderniser, and 'set-up' for conflict, even before his enthronement. The shocking thing is that so many Christian people followed the lead the press gave and never allowed themselves or our society to be exposed to the searching questions our Archbishop would like to put to us, drawing on his deep Christian roots. Admittedly, it does not help that the Archbishop's writing-style is dense, and demands effort to read. Here, assuredly, is someone who was not designed for the sound-byte society. But the sound-byte society is, perhaps, one of the first things which deserves Christian challenge. Our Lord Jesus Christ would not have fared very well in it, I believe: pithy as many of his sayings and parables are, they are often demanding for the hearer truly to understand – far too demanding to make a good a sound-byte.

Rowan Williams' time in office, so far, must have been one of the most personally painful periods of archiepiscopal experience since the Reformation or the Civil War. When he has sacrificed his own convictions about homosexuality to the demands of Church unity – seeing that as a greater good – his integrity has been questioned. When he has sought to lead in an authoritative way, he has been reviled by those who should know better. He has been repeatedly smitten on both left and right cheeks within the Anglican Communion. Tragically, someone who values the Church so highly seems to be witnessing ever-deepening schism within it at the present time. It must be agonising,

both for him and his wife, Jane, whose family background lies in the international life of the Anglican Communion.

For these reasons I would urge all of you to keep the Archbishop in your prayers. But also for the less personal, more symbolic reason, that in praying for him we are praying for the Anglican Communion itself, of which the Archbishop's office is the hub. I do not believe the issue of homosexuality should be a church-dividing issue. We have weathered storms together over the ordination of women, and the consecration of women bishops. Is there no way in which we can weather the current storms, and still hold together? I value fellowship with people on both sides of the homosexuality argument: I certainly know that both sides of that argument are represented here in our parish. That is how I would expect it to be in a truly local, non-eclectic English church. In Africa, where things seem so much more 'clear', I notice that Anglican views tend to reflect a divide made by the sharing-out of responsibilities in the nineteenth century between what have now become the two major missionary societies (CMS and USPG). In England those two strands of tradition have existed much more closely side by side, and increasingly and happily have begun to cross-fertilise each other in many creative ways. I would feel it tragic if they were absolutely torn apart by schism, either on the international scene, or here at home. Particularly if the rent reached parish level.

So, please do pray with urgency for our Anglican world family. And, at the centre of that, pray for Rowan, our Archbishop, both publicly and privately.

Your friend and vicar,

Maggie Guite