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From the Canon Theologian...

My wife and I are currently having the interior of our apartment painted, and have gone against the usual advice in our choice of colours. The Dulux paint consultant explained that a strong palette is desirable if you want rooms to feel larger, contrary to the received wisdom.

Bland colours, especially in rooms that are already large, apparently rob the space of definition. Without the boundaries being clear, we can lose a proper sense of depth. So at our place it's out with 'Rectory Beige' and in with 'Gnu Tan', 'Grand Piano', 'Ploughed Earth', 'Whisper White' and even some 'Oriental Spice'.

Our neighbours reacted with a hint of alarm when I showed them the colour swatches, one of them echoing Sir Humphrey's infamous warning, 'that's very courageous of you Minister'.

If many people tend to favour blander, safer colours, because something bolder and more confident might 'be going too far', it can be the same with Anglican religion. A strong, confidently expressed faith in Jesus and a robust confidence in our status as his chosen people seem inappropriate to many Anglicans that I have known.

The faith of Enlightenment toleration

I was brought up by faithful middle-of-the-road Anglicans who taught me to 'never talk about religion and politics' (a lesson I clearly failed to learn) and who insisted on the rules of secular Enlightenment toleration when it came to keeping their very genuine Christian faith entirely to themselves. Faith was about personal reassurance and finding strength in difficult times, with little room for doctrine let alone evangelism.

As Loren Mead put it, mission took place at the edge of the empire, rather than at the edge of the congregation, where we are learning to imagine it nowadays.

I experienced the same unease from students in my lay education course at St Barnabas' Theological College in Adelaide, with faithful lifelong Anglicans resisting theological talk about the Church as the body of Christ, and themselves as God's chosen people. Nor were they comfortable about the prospect of prophetic speech in the face of entrenched dysfunction, because they didn't want to seem 'judgemental'. The Eucharistic community as a public sign of witness to Christ and an intentional agency of his Kingdom in the world seemed like overblown, pretentious and even dangerous talk to these dear people. Likewise, a parishioner who once heard a sermon of mine on evangelism told me at the Church door afterwards that he couldn't think of any circumstances in which he'd be prepared to talk to someone about Jesus.

Apart from a measure of proper spiritual reserve, these attitudes involve fear and misunderstanding. Such people insist that privatised religion helps ensure a tolerant society, while sticking to a modest practical faith without too many firm beliefs or the imperative to share them is necessary to show respect for other people and for today's diverse religious traditions. It also helps ensure that they are not put on the spot or made to feel inadequate. Better to play it safe, and settle for a plain monotheism, ethical and wholly personal, as many Anglicans do, leaving the evangelism, let alone the theology, to those who are that way inclined.

Bold creedal colours, not the beige alternative

We might call this the "beige alternative", to which people stick thinking that bland colours make the space seem larger, and less confronting. I am suggesting the opposite. Without a clear marking out of the space with a palette of strong colours, such as our creedal faith provides, playing it safe can leave us with a space that's neither expansive nor genuinely welcoming but vaguely defined and, of course, rather dull.

The Victorians knew all about bold colours and wallpapers in their interiors—no cool neutral tones for them—just as they opted for bold versions of Anglicanism, with their Evangelicalism and Anglo-Catholicism. These twinned movements of theological rebirth, missionary zeal and personal holiness remind us that Anglicanism can be a deeply convinced and world-transforming movement, enlisting laity and clergy in lives that are anything but bland and safe. And yet these are not oppressive or exclusive movements, but vibrant with love for God's world and its people.

Because we believe that God is the God of Jesus Christ—the God in whom there is no un-Christ likeness at all, as Archbishop Michael Ramsey put it—we can be confident that proclaiming Jesus Christ with thoughtfulness, confidence and joy need never be presumptuous, exclusive or oppressive. God's 'yes' in Jesus Christ certainly means 'no' to deep-rooted human sin and self-deception, but it is a firm 'yes' to human beings, to their deepest longings and needs. The strong colours of a confident faith based in word and sacrament, in prayer and personal transformation, add definition and depth to our lives, making for a more spacious and truly welcoming Christianity.

By **Scott Cowdell**

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Comments

Great article Scott. Yes I agree there is a tendency to move towards a so called via media or tertium quid as Stephen Sykes calls it where there is no substance or commitment. Anglicanism is not about moving towards a position which does not take a stand and tries to please everyone. Rather Anglicanism is about a multiformity of views held in tension but nonetheless all part of the diversity we call Anglicanism. We cannot all be beige as you say but we need to take a stand. This of course does not mean that our stand is the only stand and we must respect the views of others even if we hold a different view. This is just being grown up and adult in our faith. Thanks for a lively piece.

Made by Brian Douglas on Wed 30 January 2013