

Epiphany Lecture Two – Church History

Okay, like I said last week, we're going to cover 2000 years of church history. There are so many ways you can do church history, depending on what theme or approach is most important to you. I'm coming at this from the Anglican perspective. So, I'm hoping to bring to you certain aspects of history that have affected our unique expression of Christianity.

Where to begin? How about we start with the birth of Jesus. There is no way to determine exactly the date of Jesus birth. Biblical scholars have given us certain understandings, but we don't know in the scriptures exactly the age of Jesus during his ministry. Now, most folks would say, Well, Jesus had a three-year ministry from the age of 30 to the age of 33. That is one way of looking at the dates, but those are based on Matthew, Mark, and Luke. If you base your chronology on John, it could very well be that Jesus had a longer ministry eight or nine years. We can't say that Jesus was born in the Year Zero and lived exactly 33 years and only had a three-year ministry. It's all a matter of how you read the scriptures.

The important thing about the scriptures, they weren't written to be historical documents, they were written to be sacred history. They were written for a purpose. As it says in John's Gospel, "There are many more stories that are written in this book, but I have chosen these to tell you so that you might believe." The writers of our gospels had a purpose and they used history to the purpose of their goals, things like Jesus being born in a manger, okay. I mean, that's pretty much like everybody would say, Oh, yeah, that's a real fact about Jesus.

Well, the truth is, that was in only in the Gospel of Luke. And it's only one little verse that says she gave birth to a child and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the Inn. That's the only reference we have to that. Think how much art, how many hymns, how many Christmas sermons have been based on that one verse in one Gospel.

So, we begin with the birth and the life and the death of Jesus and His resurrection. The first Christian writing we still have preserved is Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians. The Gospel of Mark was the first written record of the life of Jesus, more than likely that was written down around the year 70 AD. The idea is that Mark was a scribe who had been part of Paul's ministry. If you read in the book of Acts, his name is John Mark, Paul and Mark had a falling out. And Mark became a follower of Peter and one idea is that Mark's gospel was Mark sitting down at the end of Peter's life and gathering all of his first-hand account and witness. Peter is said to have died around 64 AD in Rome, having become the head of the church there, and that Mark was the first gospel written down based on Peter's teachings. Well, there's an event happening that I've had a lot of us don't factor in, but it is such a key event in the Christian faith. And that was the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD.

Up until that time, the Romans had kept the Jews as an example of what a client state should look like. They have their own King, Herod who had built the most beautiful temple on Earth. They had been exemplars of the client state. But all the way through, there had been these small insurrections, and finally, Rome decides to make an example out of the Jews marches into Jerusalem, destroys the city, tears down the temple, the new temple that was not even 100 years old, and makes it illegal for a Jew to live in Jerusalem.

So this utter destruction, Judaism in Jerusalem changed our church because in those first two generations after Jesus, and you can read about this in the book of Acts that primarily followers of Jesus were Jews who believed that Jesus was the new Jewish Messiah, but after the destruction of Judaism, and thanks to the missionary work of Paul going out into the wider Roman world after ad 70, Christianity in many ways, became more a Greek religion than a Hebrew religion.

After that time the people that became Christians had not beforehand been Jews.

Christianity now spreads throughout the Greek world. And it's after that, that the other three gospels are written the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Luke, and the Gospel of John when a little bit later, 80 and 90 or even 100 AD.

Well, this begins a period where Christianity is spreading all through the Roman Empire, and there's not any central control of the Christian faith. There was a bishop in Rome, and about 300 or 480, they started to refer to that Bishop as the Pope. But there also were strong bishops in these other Greek cities like Alexandria, and Antioch. And so, the church begins to spread, and it's very eclectic. It's very different in every different town and each church using Matthew, Mark, Luke, the letters of Paul the letters of Peter, the letters of Jude but also using their own gospel books. We know this from early Christian writers but especially now from archaeological study. In 1945, a shepherd in Egypt, found huge clay pots filled with 1200 pages of documents from the fourth century, and texts that we'd only heard a little bit about now we had actual copies. Suddenly, we have the gospel of Mary, the gospel of Judas, the gospel of the Egyptians, The Gospel of Mary - all these other gospels.

Well, I have my own theory about why those were collected and put into these big clay pots and buried in the desert around 350 or 360 AD which we will come to in a bit.

This is what is happening in Christianity in the first 200, 300 years; a lot of eclectic development. Certain cities are becoming very important. The five big cities are emphasis Alexandria, Antioch, Rome and Jerusalem. Well, guess what, whatever gospel they use became predominant, because they were the biggest cities, so the Gospel of Mark used in Rome, the Gospel of Matthew and John used in Antioch. This all changed between 325-380 AD.

First came the Emperor Constantine. His mother, Helena had been converted to Christianity. She had gone to Jerusalem. She had helped create what was called the way of the cross or Via Dolorosa. And then she converted her son, the emperor of Rome, to Christianity. He then decides Christianity will be the new national religion of Rome. Everybody's going to be Christian.

So, he called the Council of Nicea which is where our Nicene Creed was created. But when all the bishops got to Nicea they found there wasn't just one Christianity because there's been all these different expressions and ideas there were called Christians, but they were also called Arians who didn't believe that Jesus was divine they just believe that he was a good man and a prophet. On the other side, there was a Docetists who didn't believe that Jesus was human, that he was only divine. So that's why Constantine in 325 convened the Council of Nicea so that we will all be believing one Orthodox faith. This results in the Nicene Creed and the doctrine of the Trinity. Soon after, the definitive list of which books were officially included in the Bible was adopted. That is why those other heretical books were put in clay pots and buried in the desert.

It's a fascinating turn of events. All those gospels and other writings got buried and we didn't see them again until 1945. If you Google Nag Hammadi, which is the name of the place in Egypt, you'll see a fascinating list of other writings that were part of our Christian faith up until this period.

The Council of Nicea didn't settle it. Theological debates still ensued. The biggest argument is over what is the nature of Jesus? How can a being be both fully human and fully divine? I mean, in some ways, that's a paradox. And so different theologians said it different ways. There was a theologian, a Nestorius who said there were two natures in Jesus, but the only one that mattered was his divine nature.

Another major debate is about human nature? Are we capable of being godlike or price link ourselves? Or are we born in original sin and therefore can do nothing good except by the grace of God. That became the next big argument after Nicea and the principles in that argument were the famous Bishop of Hippo, Augustine, on one side and on the other side a British theologian name Pelagius. You may have read the Confessions of St. Augustine in college or studied him in history. He is the one who said, "Lord make me faithful but not yet" because he was a young pagan man who was enjoying all the ways of the world. He knew he was going to end up being a Christian someday, but he didn't want to get there too fast because he would have had to give up the good times. Prior to his conversion he had followed Manicheism which was Greek philosophy of dualism. As a Christian he became a leading proponent of the idea of original sin. On the other hand Pelagius who came out of our roots in England said, "No, we are capable of doing good; we have a divine spark within us that is connected to the Christ spark and we need to be able to honor human goodness." The battle between these two theologies, began in the 400s. Original sin won and became the Orthodox theology of the Roman Catholic Church.

So, Christianity now has become the official religion of Rome and a new idea of Orthodoxy is ruling the church.

Well, the timing wasn't so good, because that this was right when the Roman world was starting to collapse. As you remember, from our lesson last week, the Romans had already brought home the army from England on our on our charges, Hadrian's Wall, all the way back in 124, when they were trying to wall in the Roman Empire, and many places the Roman Empire is receiving and what's coming to the forefront is Christian organization. We call our regional gatherings of Episcopalians, diocese, that's a Roman word for a geographical region. The bishops adopted the Roman structure of governance for the Christian structure of governance. Church vestments were based on Roman modes of dress.

Well, as Rome collapses, we go into what is called the Dark Ages.

During this time, what was left of the Roman Empire in the East became the Christian Byzantine Empire, and that kept Christianity alive there. But then Islam came out of Arabia, and that faith spread like wildfire. Within about 100, 150 years, Islam had gone all the way from Arabia to Spain. We now think of Islam as a fairly strict and judgmental and harsh religion. But at the time, it was a much more eclectic and progressive religion. If anybody's ever been to Grenada in Spain you can learn about the great libraries and culture that the Muslims brought. The Muslims also brought with them the ancient Greek writings that had fallen into decline and were no longer known: Plato, Aristotle and much more. Thanks to the Muslims the old Greek ideas became available to us.

The Crusades also opened the window on ancient Greek thought. When western European Christianity was finally regaining its strength, they decided to send armies of knights to retake Jerusalem, to take back that symbolic city of faith. They succeeded for about 60 or 70 years, but then the Muslims repelled them. But the crusading knights brought home with them the texts of the ancient Greeks and so now after the dark ages, this influx of new teaching and new learning, not Christian teaching and learning, but ancient Greek learning. It's hard for us to think that Aristotle was ever lost, but the teachings of Aristotle were completely lost to the west until after the Muslims and the Crusades brought those texts back. Well, what then took place next was a period of great scholarship in Europe, the Muslims were finally expelled from Europe. That was thanks to Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492, same year, they sent Christopher Columbus to America, they also sent the Muslims back home. But the Muslims had also been a source of the ancient Greek texts. During this whole period in the 12th and 13th C. there is this great new explosion of learning, not so much based on scriptures, because the scriptures had all remained available, but on this rediscovery of Greek philosophy.

Probably the key figure in this whole period was Thomas Aquinas. He's the leading example of what are called the Scholastic's. These theologians are working in what are just becoming formed as the great new universities of Europe - the Sorbonne, Oxford, Cambridge. It is there that the rediscovery of Greek thought is now in dialogue with Christianity. Christianity, in light of Greek thought, takes on a whole different meaning. And that's what you find in the writings of Thomas Aquinas.

Just prior to this period, a division between the church in the West, which is tied to the new Holy Roman Empire beginning with Charlemagne, and the church in the east, which is under the Byzantine Emperor and the leaders of Constantinople. And finally, there's a head to head conflict between Rome and Constantinople. The Great Schism takes place when the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Pope mutually excommunicate one another. This along with the Reformation is one of the two major divisions in Christian history.

Well, then, we start, though, to see through the teachings of Aquinas and Don Scotus and all these other teachers, this new sort of explosion of, of creative thought about the nature of God.

Well, with this new understanding of who God is, in light of Greek thought, we need new structures to worship God in; ones that signify the magnificence of this new understanding. And that's where we begin to build our cathedrals.

Each major town now wants to have a cathedral.

It becomes an interesting though, conflict between the people that know how to build cathedrals, the Masons and the bishops, who are the patrons paying for the cathedrals, and the Masons kept their knowledge secret, and this becomes the beginning of the division between the order of masons and the Roman Catholic Church.

It goes all the way back to the 1100, 1200s and 1300s because the Masons held this esoteric knowledge and in order to have power over the bishops wouldn't reveal it. So it's a fascinating that's sort of a Dan Brown Da Vinci Code kind of layer to all this.

By this time now, Christianity has gotten very far away from Jesus teaching a few disciples on a hillside in Galilee, you have to go back and think, what did Jesus think about Christianity? You'll see it all through Mark's Gospel which we are reading right now. Jesus is constantly telling his disciples after they see him perform a miracle or a healing, don't tell anybody about me being the Messiah. Well, maybe in the telling of Mark, Matthew and Luke, he doesn't tell anybody maybe he didn't know he was.

And so this whole idea of Christianity being a religion based on a God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that might very well not have done exactly the way Jesus Christ thought about who God was, did Jesus believe he was divine?

An interesting question, each of us has to think about that. And that's what's so great about being an Anglican. We're allowed to think freely and contemplate, you know, who it is, what it is, how it might be.

I digress. Well Scholasticism gave way to the Renaissance.

But I have this idea that what happened in the Renaissance was the invention of the self. Until the Renaissance, the individual person was not the primary component of society. We lived in collectives. Serfs didn't really have an individual life, they were part of a larger system, the church was organized in such a way that people were part of a larger system, more similar to how a beehive would think and behave than what we've come to know as the building block of Western civilization - the philosophy of the individual self. And so that was the major turn that came with the Renaissance. And then it was reflected in the Protestant Reformation

because if there was an impetus for the Protestant Reformation, it was to acknowledge the freedom of each individual to pursue their belief in God.

That's why the invention of the printing press was so important. There was no stories of the Bible written in the language of the people until 1382, when John Wycliffe a radical reformer still within the Catholic tradition translated the Bible into English. That began the spread of knowledge and the spread of individual freedom. The major vehicle for this was Gutenberg press. And the very first thing he printed was the Bible. In German. I went to Yale Divinity School and we had a Gutenberg Bible at Yale's Rare Book library, and it was a beautiful, beautiful piece. It's so interesting to think that the very first things to come off the printing press were these elegant, beautiful tools for learning about God in your own language. So Gutenberg Bible is printed in 1456, only 50 years before Luther. We date the beginning of the Protestant Reformation to October 31, 1517, when Luther, a monk in Germany went to his Cathedral doors in Wittenberg on the cathedral door nailed 95 proposals, or prepositions or as they have come to be called, the 95 theses. We talked last week about the interactions of Protestantism and Anglicanism in the 16th through the 18th centuries.

On the continent the other most famous reformer besides Luther was John Calvin. When he looked at how Catholics worshiped, he found many examples of things that he feel didn't have biblical roots. Anything that didn't have a scriptural basis had to be removed. So all these beautiful cathedrals that were filled with beautiful artwork and statues, Calvin stripped them all bare. And if you've been to Switzerland, and some of the famous old churches, you'll see what was a glorious Cathedral, but it's just as simple and spare as it could be.

So that's on one side of the Protestant Reformation is Calvin and even out beyond Calvin, the more radical reformers were the people that were called the Anabaptists that went away from infant baptism to adult baptism.

At the time (not like the Southern Baptists) the Baptists were the fiercest defenders of the individual freedom of each person to believe the way they felt called to believe. Sort of funny to think and what it's become today. We as Anglicans are all the way on the other, more conservative end of the Protestant Reformation by trying to maintain a Catholic as well as a reformed tradition.

What happened next was bloodshed. We noted our bloody Anglican past last week. The wars between all of these German Prince's and Rome, the battles in England, the wars with France, the holy wars of the 15 and 1600s really consumed a lot of Christianity.

In response to the Reformation, the Roman Church convened what was called the Council of Trent. This gave birth of what was called the counter reformation where they adopted certain principles that the Protestants had raised, but still maintained the Catholic faith. So we have the counter reformation and the Reformation. And then we needed judges to decide who's following the Catholic teachings correctly. And that became the Inquisition, the Spanish Inquisition, which lasted for 350 years. But this is where the Catholics would put people on trial to find out if they are true believers or not. And through the use of torture and deprivation, they would have people recant, what they had begun to believe, as Protestants, the most famous recantation of all Galileo, I don't know if you've ever seen that movie, that there's a great portrayal of him.

The Catholics believed that the Earth was at the center of the universe, and that all other heavenly bodies rotated around the Earth.

Copernicus had begun to show through math and science that the way the stars and the planets work is not the way the Church says they work. Galileo invents the telescope and looking at Jupiter shows there were moons rotating around Jupiter. That went against Catholic dogma but that's what Galileo taught. And his and his teachings spread across Europe. But then the Inquisition had him recant that belief to save his life.

So these are very incredible times of human knowledge and, and science and discovery that came out of the Protestant Reformation commitment to the radical freedom of individuals.

We talked last week about the emergence of the Elizabethan Settlement as the Via Media between the Catholics and the Protestants and our own share of blood shed in getting to that new place. The next major movement after the Elizabethan Settlement in Anglicanism was the Methodist Movement, our branch of what is called the Great Awakening.

The Great Awakening is tied to two important Anglican figures, George Whitefield and John Wesley.

John Wesley was a great Anglican priest, one of the best students you could ever have.

So Wesley was a good Anglican. He had a group of followers that prayed all day long, they prayed so methodically, that they were made fun of and called the Methodists.

Okay, that's okay. But then one night, at a prayer meeting at Aldersgate church. John Wesley said, as he was hearing the introduction of Luther to the book of Romans, that his heart was strangely warmed.

And so all of a sudden into Christianity is injected a new element of emotion, of human exuberance, of the Spirit, you know, we call it the Holy Spirit now the Church of England and pretty much gotten rid of the Holy Spirit and worship by this time. George Whitefield, another Anglican priest had decided that it's time to take the church outside the church walls out into the world. And he began to have open field prayer meetings. And in that same period here in the 17 early 1713. George Whitefield would preach in open fields to 50,000 people.

This is when John Wesley's brother Charles Wesley, who's the one of the great hymn writers of all time, started taking old bar tunes and putting scriptural words to them, some of your favorite hymns, the ones you tap your foot two and you know the beat those are old English drinking songs that Charles Wesley add Christian lyrics to. That's going on in England, while the same thing is happening in the United States. The missionaries come from England to the United States bringing this Great Awakening. That's when Wesley and his brother tried to set up missions in Georgia. Whitefield comes to America. Wesley back in England breaks with the Church and ordains Thomas Coke who then ordains Francis Asbury and a new denomination is born.

The most famous American preacher of the Great Awakening was Jonathan Edwards, he was the pastor of the Congregational Church in Northampton, Massachusetts. And at the beginning of the Great Awakening, he preached his most famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, where he says that we are like a spider being held over a flame. And it's only by God's grace -nothing that we can do about it -that we can be saved. So repent and be saved. So that's what's going on in the 1730s to the 1760s is this first Great Awakening and its new exuberance in the spirit that's very different from the traditional religions of that time. Now, it's important to remember that in the United States as colonies, we were beginning to stand up for religious freedom separate from the King of England, in the United States, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, the established religion is Puritanism so they weren't Church of England. In Maryland, there were a lot of Catholics, in Pennsylvania, the Quakers. So there is already this sort of a new fertile ground for religious expression that isn't controlled by the English king or the European princes. In Europe if you lived in Saxony, and your prince was a Lutheran, guess what? You're going to be a Lutheran. In the United States all of a sudden there's this freedom of following your own religious beliefs.

And so by the time we get to the revolution that is a central tenet incorporated into the First Amendment to the Constitution to defend religious freedom.

So in the midst of all this, the Episcopal Church is founded in the United States after the American Revolution. They gathered in Philadelphia and started the church and in 1789 and because of who was left in the Episcopal Church, because the loyal to the king priests and lay people had all left many of them went to Canada, many went back to England who was left was a very simplified Anglican expression, you would not see candles on the altar you would not see choirs investments, you would see the priest only wearing a cassock and surplis and maybe a stole, but not an alb like I have. So, it was a very simplified kind of Anglicanism. And the primary place where this was expressed was in the colony of Virginia and Virginia to this day is considered a low church diocese because of its founding roots at the time of the of the revolution.

As we talked about last week, the Episcopal Church was lucky to have survived the revolution. I mean, to be that closely associated with the Church of England made it very hard, but we did. And now we are just one expression among a myriad of expressions of Christianity that sprung up in America alone. America goes pretty far out with its new forms. One example of how far ranging it can be, was the founding of the Mormon Church. Joseph Smith found golden tablets in New York that told him about visitations of Jesus to Mesoamerica. Other unique expressions were the utopian communities, the Oneida community free love societies, The Shakers, The 7th Day Adventists, later the Christian Scientists and the Pentecostals. There was this really rich, fertile, very indigenous explosion of faith expressions that originated in the United States.

We are out of time but there is so much more we could talk about. I am saving Vatican II (Libby) for my next session on Oct. 21 when we will dive into the Book of Common Prayer. We will continue looking through an historic lens with an emphasis on the Ecumenical Movement and the Liturgical Movement which were the true parents of the Prayer Book we have today.