

Sermon on Wednesday 5 May 2021

by Rev. Bill Church

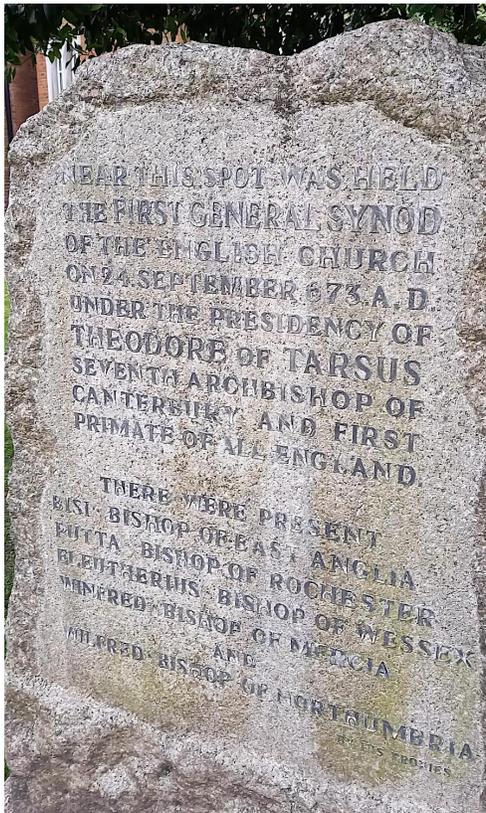
The reading from Acts 15 tells us about the Council of Jerusalem, the first general meeting of the Christian church. That will ring a bell with people from Hertford, where the first general meeting of the English Church was held in 673*.

And there are some fascinating parallels. They were both what could be described as good meetings.

I used to work in local government. A good meeting requires a strong chairman, and it was a fundamental rule that there should be an accurate record of what was decided at meetings – the minutes – and that these should be communicated to those who had to act on them.

We have clear minutes for both Hertford and Jerusalem, but in both cases written by somebody who was not there. For Hertford, the record of proceedings is in Bede's great History of the English Church and People (Book 4, ch5). Bede was born in the year the Synod took place, so he was not there in person! He was writing some fifty years after the event, so he must have relied on a source other than personal knowledge. Bede says that Theodore of Tarsus, Archbishop of Canterbury and portrayed in our east window, instructed his secretary to write down the minutes and get all those present to sign, and to circulate them, and I assume Bede would have seen that.

Luke, who wrote Acts, was not at the Council of Jerusalem but would certainly have heard of it from Paul and could have seen the letter sent to Antioch.



Theodore was in the chair at Hertford and used the meeting to get some unity among the bishops at a time when there was no unified English state. James the brother of the Lord was in the chair at Jerusalem. He was generally believed to be conservative about opening up the church. Nevertheless, he allowed full debate, summed up and offered a firm conclusion, which may well not have been his personal first choice.

The debate at Hertford was important for the church in England and resulted in nine decisions on church government and one on divorce. The decision at Jerusalem was perhaps the most important the church has ever made. The earliest church was Jewish and then extended to include people like the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius the centurion, who were not Jews but followed the Jewish religion, and Samaritans who followed a similar but divergent faith.

Then Paul and Barnabas began encountering Greeks and Romans with a completely different religious background,

what we might call paganism, with no link to the law and the prophets.

Could they be Christians without first becoming Jews? The Council of Jerusalem decided they could be, subject to four conditions - three about food laws and the other requiring converts to give up the rather lax Graeco-Roman sexual morality. Some have seen in the four conditions a reference back to God's covenant with Noah, which was for all humankind not just Jews, but I suspect it was a compromise, a way of easing the pain for those who did not win the argument.

There are continuing lessons here.

Some people think they own the Christian faith, or a particular church, and want to keep out others who think or look or speak differently. That is not the way forward but issues need to be talked through, not by shouting at each other from a distance, but by meeting and talking – and listening – and leaders may have to accept outcomes which are not their own first choice.

And there is virtue in easing the way for those who find the outcome uncomfortable. After the Council of Jerusalem, the church was able to spread round the Roman empire and, in time, worldwide. It needs wise and considered resolution of differences between Christians to help carry on this flourishing.

*The stone (pictured) at Hertford Castle reads:

'Near this spot was held the first general synod of the English Church on 24 September 673 A.D under the presidency of Theodore of Tarsus, seventh Archbishop of Canterbury and first Primate of all England. There was present Bisi - Bishop of East Anglia, Putta - Bishop of Rochester, Eleutherius - Bishop of Wessex, Winfred - Bishop of Mercia, Wilfred - Bishop of Northumbria'