

Top Ten Reasons for being Anglican 1: STRANGE PRACTICES

Psalm 108:8-13, John 3:14-21 [MW20-34]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 13 September 2020

Did you ever watch “The Late Show” with David Letterman?

- it used to be on Prime, a few years ago now, weeknights around 11pm? the host, David Letterman, had a spot most nights called the “Top Ten”
- things like the top ten signs you’re in the wrong job or the top ten reasons a sports team lost the final ... that kind of thing humorous, but with a definite point
- comedian and actor Robin Williams must have been inspired by this and came up with a ‘Top Ten’ list of his own:
The Top Ten Reasons for Being an Anglican
- actually he said “Episcopalian” which is what Americans call the Anglican Church
- let me give you each a copy of Robin Williams’ Top Ten list

[hand out]

We’re not going to look at all of these

- though each one would indeed repay further study but we will focus on four areas over the next couple of months beginning with number ten on the list, under the heading “Strange Practices”
- you can see for yourself that number ten is in fact “No snake handling”

Do you know anything about that? About “snake handling”?

- I remember seeing something on TV about a church where people handled snakes certainly odd, definitely a “strange practice”
- so I have done some research here, briefly summarised, is what I found out about “snake handling” and “church”

Snake handling is a religious ritual in a small number of Pentecostal churches in the United States, usually characterized as rural. Practitioners believe it dates to antiquity and quote the Gospels of Mark and Luke to support the practice:

And these signs shall follow them that believe: In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues. They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. (Mark 16:17-18)

Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you. (Luke 10:19)

The practice of snake-handling first appeared in American Christianity around 1910 associated with the ministry of George Went Hensley of Grasshopper Valley in south-eastern Tennessee. Hensley was a minister of the Church of God. In the 1920s, the Church of God repudiated the practice of snake-handling, and Hensley and his followers formed a separate body. Snake-handling in north Alabama and north Georgia originated with James Miller in Sand Mountain, Alabama at about the same time. Snake Handling eventually crossed the borders into Canada into the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia. In 2004, a handful of Canadians also got a "revelation from God" about snake-handling as a 'correct' doctrine.

As in the early days, worshipers are still encouraged to lay hands on the sick, speak in tongues, provide testimony of miracles, and occasionally consume poisons such as strychnine. Gathering mainly in homes and converted buildings, they generally adhere to strict dress codes such as uncut hair, no cosmetics and ankle-length dresses for women, and short hair and long-sleeved shirts for men. Most snake handlers preach against any use of all types of tobacco and alcohol.

The practice usually consists of a worship service with singing, praying, speaking in tongues and preaching. The front of the meetinghouse, behind the pulpit, is the designated area for handling snakes. Rattlesnakes, cottonmouths, and copperheads (venomous snakes native to North America) are the most common, but even cobras have been used. As the service crescendos, those who feel "anointed" approach the front and begin to pick up the snakes, usually raising them into the air and sometimes allowing the snakes to crawl on their bodies. The snakes are considered incarnations of demons, and handling the snakes demonstrates one's power over them. Members are not required to handle the snakes. Some "believers" will also engage in drinking poison (most commonly strychnine) at this time.

Most religious snake handlers are still found in the Appalachian Mountains and other parts of the south-eastern United States, especially in such states as Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Ohio. Most, if not all, use the King James Version of the Bible and consider other versions to be demonic or false. Like their predecessors, they believe in a strict and literal interpretation of the Bible. Most of these churches are non-denominational, believing that denominations are 'man made'. Worshipers often attend services several nights a week. Services, if the Holy Spirit "intervenes", can last up to five hours, and the minimum time is usually ninety minutes.

Several of the leaders in these churches have been bitten numerous times, as indicated by their distorted extremities. Hensley, the founder of modern snake handling in the Appalachian Mountains, died from snakebite in 1955. In 1998, snake-handling evangelist John Wayne "Punkin" Brown died after being bitten by a timber rattler. Another follower died in 2006 at a church in Kentucky. Over sixty cases of death as the result of snakebites in religious worship services have been documented in the United States. If a handler is bitten, it is generally interpreted as a lack of faith or failure to follow the leadership of the Spirit. But individual incidents may actually be understood in a variety of ways. Bitten believers usually do not seek medical help, but look to the Lord for their healing.

Anyone agree with me that this whole "snake handling" thing is just a little

- or may be even more than a little, strange?
however as Anglicans we do not have to handle snakes
thank goodness! Thank God!
- however, do we perhaps have to accept snake handling as a very different
yet legitimate or possible way of expressing faith and worshipping God?
- or is that maybe going way too far ...

However ... it made me think ...

- and wonder ... are there things – practices, rituals, behaviours that we engage in
as Anglicans when we come together as a church
- practices that maybe people who are not Anglican, not even Christian
would think are strange
- as strange as handling snakes for the Lord???

Have a think, talk to the people around you

- is there anything about what we do here, about things in this building
that might cause people to question, raise the alarm, be off putting ... ???

[time for thinking/discussion]

Any thoughts ... ?

Here are some things I came up with

- nothing bizarre or designed to be 'off the wall' or 'over the top'
there's a good reason for all this
there is sound, solid tradition behind it
- yet if you are not aware of the tradition or the reasons
or have no experience of it
- it may all seem very odd, if not strange ...

What about this [point to robes and stole]

- as a colleague once described it:
"the Anglican Church, men in dresses"
it's not how people normally dress – except at a fancy dress party
- why do we dress like this? well it is part of our history and tradition
and we do like to dress up because it is a special occasion
we also enjoy celebrating and having fun
- sometimes it is even kind of like a party ...
but if you are not used to it, it could seem just a little strange

Then there is our celebration of communion

- eating Jesus' body and drinking his blood
right at the beginning the early Christians had problems with that one
- with people wondering if they were cannibals of some kind
which is one reason outsiders were not allowed to be present
at the celebration of communion
- after a course of instruction and baptism people were allowed to join in
because then they would know what it was all about
- the whole practice of communion is based in Jewish meal traditions
which are a long way removed from 21st century New Zealand traditions
- so we can understand if people are not quite sure
just what is going on when we "celebrate communion"
- these days we can take nothing for granted
it is beyond the experience of a great many of our contemporaries
so they can be excused if we seem to indulge in strange practices ...

What about things like having candles burning in well-lit churches

- when it is daylight and there is no dinner party?
people might wonder about that
- they might also wonder about all our 'standing/sitting/kneeling'
and this strange ritual of "passing the peace"
- we have a prayer book because we wish to be inclusive
to allow and encourage people to follow the service
- to emphasise that the people in the pews are not an audience
rather a congregation who have an important part to play in the service
and in Christian life
- we say that our prayer book = participation
yet that's not what many people expect and so they find it just a little strange
- and beyond all that is our church 'decoration'
which is supposed to speak for itself
but sometimes it seems people need some help with the translation ... !

One of the great things about the Anglican Church is that it has all this and more!

- here is what one 'ordinary Canadian Anglican' has to say:

I love being an Anglican. The great strength of the Anglican church today is that it is a church where you can worship with incense; bells; candles; organ music; choirs; guitars; praise music; drums; bass guitars; certainly in the same diocese, sometimes in the same church! It is a church where you can cross yourself and bow, or you can sing a praise chorus with your hands in the air. It is a church where your priest might wear a very plain black suit and collar for one service, and glittering vestments for the next one. Do you know why? Because all of these things are style, not substance. The substance is Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

We gather in this building, Sunday by Sunday because of Jesus Christ

- whose life, actions and teaching are our inspiration and example who died and rose again for us – Hallelujah!
- and I guess anything and everything we do is to help us express that and share that Good News

I really like what the former Bishop of Oxford, John Pritchard, said in a sermon about this:

'It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.' That's a very important verse for me. 'It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.' I don't need to go searching for God, seeking a spiritual high; he is quietly lodged within. If I let Christ ease his way into my life I have the greatest resource, the most irresistible source of life. Bishop John V. Taylor once wrote: 'It has long been my conviction that God is not hugely interested as to whether we are religious or not. What matters, and matters supremely, is whether we are alive or not. If your religion brings you more fully to life, God will be in it; but if your religion inhibits your capacity for life or makes you run away from it, you may be sure God is against it just as Jesus was.' Or, as Jesus said, 'I have come that they may have life and have it in abundance.'

That seems to me to be a good test when considering 'practices', strange or otherwise

- does it inhibit the capacity for life?
or does it help bring a person more fully to life?
- I'll let you make up your own mind about snake handling
(incidentally, that's another good thing about being Anglican
you are allowed, in fact encouraged, to make decisions for yourself!)
- however in regard to "Anglican Practice"
it is an encouragement to make sure all that we do and say
helps bring people more fully to life

Strange practices?

- as Anglicans, let's show we are alive by all the ways we celebrate life!

Top Ten Reasons for being an Anglican

10. No snake handling.
9. You can believe in dinosaurs.
8. Male and female
God created them;
male and female we ordain them.
7. You don't have to check your
brains at the door.
6. Pew aerobics.
5. Church year is colour-coded.
4. Free wine on Sunday.
3. All of the pageantry -
none of the guilt.
2. You don't have to know how to
swim to get baptized.

And the Number One reason
to be an Anglican:

1. No matter what you believe,
there's bound to be at least one
other Anglican who agrees
with you.