

Early Church History

Church History: Why bother? (e.g. “What do you teach?” >>> Conversation stopper/ Glazed expression/“Rolling of eyes”)

1. **Because it's *exciting*!** (e.g. my discovery of *Martyrdom of Polycarp* in Timaru Public Library)
2. **Because we are commanded to *remember*** God's acts in history (270+ references to 'remembering' in Bible; Christians believe that God has primarily acted in Jesus Christ and continues to act through His Church; no history = no Bible):
 - Deut.8:2 **Remember** how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.
 - Heb.10:32 **Remember** those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering.
 - 1 Cor.11:25 This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink of it, in **remembrance** of me.

3. **Most importantly: Because “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”** >>> implications for “traveller” (see things differently on return to own country/time) – changes our perspective and our worldview

T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding' (1943):

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Early Church = Complex period of church history: 3 major themes

1. Expansion
2. Persecution and Martyrdom
3. The Definition of Orthodoxy

1. Expansion

a. Small beginnings:

- 120 disciples of a disgraced, executed criminal
- In hiding (?) in Upper Room (doors locked: John 20:19)
- Christianity = minor Sect of Judaism

b. Expansion: By 300CE, had penetrated every part of the Roman Empire; 10% of population Christian (at all levels of society); also extensive Christian coverage eastwards of the Roman Empire:

- **Thomas >>> India** (52CE) (*Acts of Thomas*)

- **Bardaisan (196CE)**: lists 8 locations eastwards from Judaea as far as the Kushans (northern Afghanistan/West Pakistan) where Christian communities are to be found [= focal point of “War on Terror”]
- Extended from **Britain (NW) to North Africa (SW)**; and from **Armenia (NE) to Afghanistan/Pakistan/India (SE)**

c. But story of Christian expansion is often a hidden one - Examples:

- NT: **Paul preaches as far as Illyricum** (= **Albania**) (Rom.15:19) and plans to visit **Spain** (Rom.15:24) – nothing of this in Acts (= partial, selective, account)
- **Christians in Asia** (**later** examples: [**Tibet** (Catholicos Timothy I appoints bishop for Tibet in 781CE); **Java** (Christian community in Majapait kingdom 1346CE: Giovanni de Marignolli – “after a harvest of souls – for there are Christians there – we sailed away...”) Nothing known of these Christians!! = “hidden history” of Christianity in Asia, but Persian church a power-house of this expansion

d. How and why did Christianity spread?

- **Power of the Spirit** (Spirit-empowered, Spirit-led community - Acts 4:31; 8:29; 11:12) [William Barclay: “The Spirit became the dominant reality in the life of the early Church.... The early Church was a Spirit-filled Church and precisely therein lay its power.” (Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp.12-13)]
- **Not just “Professional” witnesses** (i.e. apostles and other ministries) – all Christians involved, e.g. Philip [Acts 8], Priscilla and Aquila [Acts 18] Celsus extract (**Handout 1**)
- **Alexamenos graffito**
- **Role of persecution and martyrdom** (next section)

2. Persecution and Martyrdom

a. Christianity persecuted from the beginning (Jewish authorities [Acts 4, 7-8]; Greek/pagan opponents [Acts 16, 19:23ff]; Roman persecutions **later** (but misperceptions here – usually not an “official” persecution)

b. Nero’s persecution = first “official” persecution (Tacitus extract on **Handout 2**)

Why was this? Note:

- Hated for abominations (= **misunderstanding of Christian practices**: accused of incest, cannibalism, black magic, etc.)
- Christ had suffered extreme penalty at hands of Pontius Pilatus >>> deadly superstition; Judaea = first source of the evil; all things hideous and shameful
- Convicted, not so much of crime of arson (cp. 2 Thess.1:7; 2 Pet.3:7), but of hatred of human race
- Christians = criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment

- But key issue (not mentioned by Tacitus) was that **Christians would not offer pinch of incense to Caesar (“Caesar is Lord”)** = test of public loyalty to Empire/gods. Because could not do this, regarded with extreme suspicion >>> public scapegoats for anything that went wrong (Tertullian extract on **Handout 3a)** = Public mob violence, rather than official policy of persecution (only 2 “official” persecutions = Decius (249-251CE) and Diocletian (303-311CE))

c. The Impact of Martyrdom

- Apologists >>> foundations of Christian theology (not creation of doctrine, but pattern of rational explanation of doctrine)
- Faithfulness to death – impact of Christian martyrdom on observers (Polycarp, Blandina, Tertullian [**Handout 3b and 3c)**)
- Cost to being a Christian

d. The End of Persecution

- **Conversion of Constantine** (**Handout 4:** Eusebius’ account of Constantine’s “conversion”);
- Edict of Milan (313) [**Handout 5)** = End of persecution (Christianity becomes *religio licita* >>> favoured by Constantine – why?)
- **Consequences:**
 - Massive **influx** into churches (Christianity = popular);
 - Decline in spiritual life (“little cost” >>> **Monasticism)**
 - Gave church opportunity to **consolidate**; State resources available to enforce Church decisions

3. The Definition of Orthodoxy

- Models of church– variety of church viewpoints in first 3 centuries >>> consolidated [>>> normative] viewpoint in 4th and 5th centuries = “Orthodoxy”]
- 4th century = century of doctrinal controversy (Arian controversy (318CE) >>> Council of Nicaea (325CE) and subsequent Councils. Issue = Eternal relation of Father to Son (is the Son inferior to the Father? – implied in words “Father” and “Son”; Arius: “there was [a time] when he was not”)
5th century focuses more on the way in which divine and human are united in Christ (*theotokos* // “God is not a baby two or three months old”)
Controversies eventually resolved at Council of Chalcedon (451CE) – Creed of Chalcedon becomes standard of Western Church since that time (“O come all ye faithful” – 2nd verse); Church discipline on basis of doctrine...
- Similarly, **consolidation of in Canon of Scripture (which books?)** [**Handout Section 3c)**:
 - Early consensus on most of NT (4 Gospels, Paul’s letters, 1 John)
 - **Key criteria:**

- Apostolicity: was the book written by an apostle or by someone closely associated with an apostle?
- Catholicity: was the book accepted by all the churches (not just by a single [sectarian] church or group of churches? (e.g. 1 Enoch; also Didache, 1 Clement, Hermas)
- Antiquity: did the book come from the earliest Christian era (i.e. the Apostolic era)?
- Problem books:
 - Hebrews: anonymous – who wrote it?
 - James: = brother of Jesus; but appears to contradict Paul’s epistles
 - 1 and 2 Peter: was Peter the author?
 - 2 and 3 John: written by John “the elder”, not by John the apostle
 - Jude = brother of Jesus; but quotes from non-canonical books
 - Revelation: not of apostolic authorship; only apocalyptic book in NT
 - Other books (e.g. 1 Enoch) not accepted by whole church
- Development of Canon parallels development of Orthodoxy (1st “standard” NT Canon = Athanasius [367CE])
- **Role of bishops also increasingly elevated and more powerful** >>> rise of Papacy in West (especially after the fall of Rome in 410CE)

4. Conclusions

What strikes us as “unusual”? **In what way did the early church “do things differently there”?**

- **Spirit-led/Spirit-empowered community**; highly mobile; everyone involved
- **Cost to being a Christian** (“take up your cross daily and follow me” – largely lost in Christian West)
- **Not initially a doctrinal uniformity** (“I know **whom** I have believed”, not “I know **what** I have believed”)

In 2010, what does all this say to us at St Stephen’s Leith Valley? What things look different?...

(Handout follows on below)

Early Church History 21 March 2010

Deut.8:2; Heb.10:32; 1 Cor.11:25

“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”

L.P. Hartley, *The Go-between*, 1953

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot, ‘Little Gidding’, 1943

1. Expansion

a. Small beginnings

b. Expansion of Christianity within Roman Empire and eastwards

- Thomas to India? (52CE)
- ‘Kushans’ by 196CE
- Extent by 300CE

c. Examples of ‘hidden’ Christian expansion

- Paul in Illyricum and Spain (Romans 15)
- Later Christian communities in Asia

d. How and why did Christianity spread?

- Power of the Spirit
- Not just ‘Professional’ missionaries:

Extract 1: Celsus (c.178CE)

... In private houses also we see wool-workers, cobblers, laundry-workers, and the most illiterate and bucolic yokels, who would not dare to say anything at all in front of their elders and more intelligent masters. But whenever they get hold of children in private and some stupid women with them, they let out some astounding statements as, for example, that they must not pay any attention to their father and school-teachers, but must obey them; they say that these talk nonsense and have no understanding, and that in reality they neither know nor are able to do anything good, but are taken up with mere empty chatter. But they alone, they say, know the right way to live, and if the children would believe them, they would become happy and make their home happy as well. And if just as they are speaking they see one of the school-teachers coming, or some intelligent person, or even the father himself, the more cautious of them flee in all directions; but the more reckless urge the children on to rebel. They whisper to them that in the presence of their father and their schoolmasters they do not feel able to explain anything to the children, since they do not want to have anything to do with the silly and obtuse teachers who are totally corrupted and far gone

in wickedness, and who inflict punishment on the children. But, if they like, they should leave father and their schoolmasters, and go along with the women and little children who are their playfellows to the wooldresser's shop, or to the cobbler's or the washerwoman's shop, that they may learn perfection. And by saying this they persuade them.

(Origen, *Against Celsus*, 111.55)

- 'Alexamenos graffito'
- Role of persecution and martyrdom

2. Persecution and Martyrdom

a. Christians persecuted from the beginning

b. Nero's persecution (64CE)

Extract 2: Tacitus (c.112CE, describing the Great Fire of Rome, 64CE)

[The Great Fire of Rome took place in July 64. Only four of the fourteen wards of the city escaped damage. Nero was suspected of having caused the fire.]

...But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a *class hated for their abominations*, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a *deadly superstition*, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, *the first source of the evil*, but also in the City, where *all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world* meet and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who confessed; then, upon their information, *an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of arson, as of hatred of the human race*. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames. These served to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in a chariot. Hence, even for *criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment*, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed.

(Tacitus, *Annals*, xv.44:2-8) – italics added

c. Impact of Martyrdom

Extract 3: Tertullian (c.200CE)

- ... If the Tiber reaches the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky doesn't move or the earth does, if there is famine, if there is

plague, the cry is at once: 'The Christians to the lion!' What, all of them to one lion? (Tertullian, *Apology* 40.2)

- b. ... Everyone in the face of such prodigious endurance feels himself, as it were, struck by some doubt, and ardently desires to find out what is at the bottom of this matter: from the moment that he discovers the truth he forthwith embraces it himself... (Tertullian, *To Scapula* 5)
- c. ... As often as you mow us down, the more numerous do we become; the blood of the Christians is the seed. (Tertullian, *Apology* 50.13)

d. The end of persecution

- The 'conversion' of Constantine and the Edict of Milan (312-313CE)

Extract 4: Conversion of Constantine (312CE)

...Accordingly [Constantine] besought his father's god in prayer, beseeching and imploring him to tell him who he was and to stretch out his right hand to help him in his present difficulties. And while he was thus praying with fervent entreaty, a most incredible sign appeared to him from heaven ... He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and an inscription, CONQUER BY THIS [*in hoc signo vincit*] attached to it. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on an expedition, and witnessed the miracle.

He said, moreover, that he doubted within himself what the import of this portent could be. And while he continued to ponder and reason on its meaning, night overtook him; then in his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies.

(Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, I.26-29)

The persecution of the Christians was ended by the Edict of Milan:

Extract 5: Edict of Milan (313CE)

...When we, Constantine Augustus and Licinius Augustus, had ... met at Milan, and were conferring about all things which concern the advantage and security of the state, we thought that amongst other things ..., the reverence paid to the Divinity merited our first and chief attention. *Our purpose is to grant both to the Christians and to all others full authority to follow whatever worship each man has desired; whereby whatsoever Divinity dwells in heaven may be benevolent and propitious to us*, and to all who are placed under our authority. Therefore we thought it salutary and most proper to establish our purpose that no man whatever should be refused complete toleration

(Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, 48:2-12) – italics added

- Consequences (Influx/Monasticism/Consolidation)

3. The Definition of Orthodoxy

a. Metaphor: Is the Church a 'Tree' or a 'River'?

b. 4th/5th centuries: multiple controversies, leading to definition of 'Orthodoxy' by 'ecumenical' Church Councils (Nicaea 325CE, Constantinople 381CE, Ephesus 431CE and Chalcedon 451CE)

c. Consolidation of NT Canon – which books?

Accepted Books	Criteria	Questioned Books
Gospels	Apostolicity	Hebrews
Acts	Catholicity	James
Paul's Epistles	Antiquity	1 and 2 Peter
1 John	etc.	2 and 3 John
		Jude
		Revelation
		Other books, e.g. 1 Enoch

d. Role of bishops more elevated and powerful // Rise of Papacy in the West

4. Conclusions

- In what ways did the early Church 'do things differently' there?
- Spirit-led/Spirit-empowered community
- Cost to being a Christian
- Not *initially* a doctrinal conformity
- In 2010, what does all this say to us at St Stephens Leith Valley? What things *look* different?