

## Scripture, reason and tradition

In the middle of the green that surrounds Exeter Cathedral is a statue of a seated man, modest in size and humble in bearing. This is Richard Hooker who was born in 1554 near Exeter and died in 1600 having influenced the Church of England in ways that are especially relevant today. He wrote one of the first theological books to be published in the English language, and was much admired by John Locke and later philosophers in the pragmatic English tradition. You need to know one sound-bite that comes from Hooker. He stated that the theology of the Church of England is based on Scripture, Reason and Tradition. So the next time you are challenged about whether you are a "Bible-believing Christian" you can say "Yes, *and* I believe in Reason and Tradition." Your challenger won't like that for there is a certain sort of Christian who wants to be opposed to who wants to be able to split the world into "Christians like me" and the rest. "Yes" you can claim, "I do believe in the Bible. AND I believe that reason and tradition can be divinely inspired and so help us understand the Bible more fully."

But it is good to understand some of the significance of Hooker's triad of scripture, reason and tradition.

1. We need to be honest about the complexity of being Christian. It is not a simple matter of believing everything that is written in the Bible. Indeed, it is important to keep in mind that, however pressing the difficulties are that we experience today, patterns of faithful discipleship have been developed, tested and re-invented throughout the centuries. Some Christians seem only to recognize two ages in world history: the time of Jesus and now. For them, the Christian vocation is reduced to two issues: understanding what Jesus did, and trying to do the same today. But history shows life is more complex than that; in fact, history makes life more complex. Who was it that said "those who do not know their history are bound to repeat it?" So Anglicans affirm the importance of Tradition because it is a record of how Christians have struggled to be faithful in times that are likely to be substantially different to our own. Tradition is not a second source of divine wisdom. I am not claiming that we believe in the Bible and the Tradition, as two separate items. Rather our tradition is an accumulation of more or less successful attempts to respond to God's word that continues to come to us through the pages of scripture.
2. The word Reason (as used by Hooker) is easy to misunderstand. Hooker was not urging us to be merely rational in an intellectual way; he would have included emotional and spiritual reasons as well as other types of understanding. We are much more familiar with multiple intelligences today; all this would have been included in Hooker's term Reason. Michael Adie, once Bishop of Guildford, used to expand Hooker's triad by naming it as "Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience." But that is not necessary as in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the term Reason included practical wisdom and reflectiveness. A stereotypical evangelical sermon is 35 minutes of Bible exposition followed by 5 minutes of "application." Even that tradition therefore recognizes that the Bible on its own does not make a full spiritual meal or we are nourished by making the message of Scripture real today. It is in the process of embodying God's Word today in practical action that we come close to God.
3. It is also important to understand how these three relate to each other. So far, I have been using a pattern that places Scripture at the beginning, sees Tradition as the

accumulation of living Scripture, and Reason as our own attempts to do the same today. But if we see the Bible only as the origin, we are consigning it to the past. The Bible is also our goal. As I teach preachers how to prepare captivating sermons, I encourage them to consider preaching *towards* the Bible, and not just *from* the Bible. It makes an enormous difference if the text which forms the basis of a sermon is used as the last sentence (rather than, as often happens, as the first sentence). The Bible is summons and aspiration. We need preachers (and others) to help us understand the life we are living so that we are made ready to hear afresh God's word.

Yes, I believe in the God who is revealed through the stories, poems, commands and reflections made available to us in the pages of the Bible. Discipleship flourishes as we also humbly take into account how others have attempted to be faithful and listen carefully to the current wisdom that is offered to us today.