

1662 and all that

Dear Friends

Some years gain an association with a particular event in time, for example, 1066 is synonymous the Battle of Hastings and the consequent Norman Conquest, 1666 with the Great Fire of London and for around half of the St Andrew's community 1966 with World Cup victory (the majority of the rest are still anticipating the World Cup adorned in tartan on an as yet unspecified year!).

Shout out 1662 in St Andrew's and I suspect there may be two different associations. For those with an Anglican background, and there are many within St Andrew's, 1662 is the year in which the Book of Common Prayer was published. The full name of the book is found on the frontispiece. The 1662 Prayer Book succeeded a variety of editions published through a 100 plus years in which religion in England veered from Catholicism to Anglicanism to Catholicism to Anglicanism to Protestantism and back to Anglicanism!

The book has been and remains valued by countless numbers of people as a devotional aid to worship. But its publication was accompanied by a Parliamentary Act known as the Act of Uniformity which gave the prayer book a distinctly political overtone. The Act required all office holders in church and government to adhere to the use of the public prayers, church rites such as baptism and communion and other religious ceremonies as prescribed in the 1662 Prayer Book. You couldn't be a minister, a civil servant or serve in the military without adhering to the Prayer Book. Consequently the Act was a terrible blow to many who valued the freedom of worship that was flowering in the wake of the Reformation.

Some of those within St Andrew's with a Reformed background will associate 1662 with the Act of Uniformity, which effectively forced over 1700 ministers and many congregations to go with their conscience and leave their church, feeling unable to be bound by set rites and prayers in an event remembered as the Great Ejection. Some of these clergy and members founded new churches with some still thriving as URCs today. It is this Act together with subsequent harsh restrictions that led to the definition of non-conformists that is those who practice their faith in a way distinct from the Anglican Prayer Book.

The 350th anniversary of the Great Ejection is to be marked on 7th February 2012 in a service at Westminster Abbey. Alongside this the Church of England and United Reformed Church have jointly produced a report entitled ~~±~~Healing the past . Building the futureqwhich recommends a public declaration of their penitence for the divisions of the past, and their mutual recognition of each other in the present as churches belonging to the one Church of Jesus Christ, together with a commitment to further joint work on the practice and spiritualities of the two denominations.

It is good to reflect that today St Andrew~~q~~ enjoys excellent relationships with St Edmund~~q~~ in whose parish we are situated. These will be confirmed in our ecumenical covenant service which St Andrew~~q~~ is hosting on Sunday 22nd January. It is also interesting to reflect how our heritage of freedom in worship has shaped and still shapes our worship.

Looking back we may see fruits of such freedom which are not so much what any one individual wants but the collective response to God in worship. In the seventeenth/eighteenth century non-conformity witnessed the flowering of hymnody through the writings of people like George Watt. In the 20th century the concept of family church developed through which children were incorporated within worship rather than separated in a Sunday School. Our heritage of freedom in worship readily enables us to develop forms of worship that meet the spiritual needs of a new generation following Jesus. This includes our monthly Messy Church, in which children and adults experience the Bible stories and love of God through craft, worship and a shared meal.

The 1662 ~~±~~Great Ejectionqwas a time of challenge and testing. One lesson from our heritage is to be open to discerning where God might be calling St Andrew~~q~~ as a faithful worshipping community today, for our reformed heritage is liberty in worship rather than any one form or tradition. We have much to be thankful for and reflect on 350 years after the Great Ejection.

As the New Year unfolds and snowdrops peep through the winter cold, may you experience green shoots of God~~q~~ love in your heart.

Take care, God bless

David