



A Sermon preached at St Martin-in-the-Fields  
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## England – Green, Pleasant, or a Dangerous National Identity?

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### Reading: Jeremiah 32: 17-22; Revelation 21: 1-4

England doesn't know what it is. And it doesn't know if that's a problem. Two years ago it stood on the brink of the break-up of the United Kingdom. Today it stands on the brink of departure from Europe. I want tonight to explore what we mean by the word 'England' and how the answer to that question can help us work out what it means to be a Christian in England.

The word English doesn't so much name an identity as invoke a story. I want to tell that story tonight, in seven chapters. So here we go. Chapter one begins to emerge around 400 AD. It used to be thought that there was wave upon wave of migration by Angles and Saxon from northern Germany around the fifth and sixth centuries; today it's more common to judge that these peoples, while perhaps not becoming the majority, were nonetheless disproportionately influential. Either way, we can already see that the British were originally a different people from the English, who got their name from the incoming Angles; and that those living in the land we now called England were mongrels from the word go. We could call chapter one *England is not native*; the English are not an aboriginal people.

And that's even truer of English Christianity. The story told by the Venerable Bede in the eighth century speaks of a faith brought to England by the Romans, with St Alban the first martyr in 304. Subsequently it was promoted most significantly by Celtic missionaries from Ireland and Scotland, with a lot of activity around Northumberland around the sixth and seventh centuries. And at the same time it was brought once again from Rome by Augustine of Canterbury at the end of the sixth century. Christianity was never a native English thing: it was a Middle Eastern phenomenon, shaped by Roman and Celtic consciousness.

Chapter two takes us forward to the most famous date in English history: 1066. After several centuries of being vulnerable to Scandinavian attack, and eventually rule, this was the moment when England became tied inextricably to the continent of Europe. The Normans to the south, ironically originally Nordic themselves, seized England after the Battle of Hastings, and thenceforth England was ruled over by kings who were either French, or had more than half an eye on their French dominions. The Hundred Years' War started in 1337 when Edward III asserted his right to the French throne, and that claim was upheld by most of the English monarchs right up until 1801. Leaving aside the continent of Europe, since William the Conqueror the king of England had largely ruled over Wales, a situation regularised in Henry VIII's time; and from 1603 Ireland and Scotland began to be integrated into what became the United Kingdom, being formalised in Scotland a century later and in Ireland a century after that. And that's even before you look into the colonial story: for when England's European aspirations were clearly over, its global ambitions began to take hold. In short it's

seldom been a simple matter to identify what geographical and political unit the name 'England' denoted. Chapter two is thus called *England is not stable*.

Which again has a direct connection to what it means to be the Church of England. As we've seen, for most of the last 1600 years, either England didn't exist as a coherent country, or it was part of a unit that included lands on the continent, or it was part of a multi-ethnic entity including Wales and at times Scotland and Ireland. So the Church of England has seldom been the church of the whole nation, geographically understood. It has noble ideals, of being a blessing to everyone who lives in this land; but it's seldom been clear what's meant by 'this land.' For at least 500 years it's been controversial what's meant by the word 'church.' But for much longer it's been complicated what's meant by the word 'England.'

And so to chapter three, which translates this complex political and geographical history into ecclesial experience. This chapter is called *England is not unified*. The threat of civil war, which surfaced in the twelfth century, and dominated the fifteenth century, is the single most significant explanation for the drive behind Henry VIII's desperate search for a male heir. Once the Reformation took hold, religion became a constant, but seldom solitary, point of division, most obviously in the Civil War and Glorious Revolution of the seventeenth century. Meanwhile divisions in England and Scotland, exported across the Irish Sea, have caused tensions in Ireland ever since. England has certainly been blessed not to have been invaded, dominated and pillaged by a foreign power for a thousand years. But it's had plenty of internal divisions of its own. Translated to a church context, the painful truth for the Church of England is that it's perhaps never been a church for all the people of England. When I was a vicar in Norwich I wondered why church attendance in the city was unusually low; I was told the church had backed the wrong side in the disputes of the county since the Peasants' Revolt in 1381. Over and again in history you find exasperated population didn't distinguish between their political, social and ecclesiastical rulers, and had equal disdain for all of them. The Church of England longs to be the church of all the people, but it long ago made commitments that make it hard for many if not most of the people to see and believe that.

Which leads us to chapter four, and a profound change in philosophy. The Church of England thinks of itself as a church for all the people of England. But in the seventeenth century, this was manifestly not the case. On the one hand were the Dissenters – the Congregationalists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Quakers; on the other hand were the Roman Catholics. When it looked like James II was going to impose Catholicism on the whole land, the Church of England had to make a choice, and it chose to make common cause with the Protestant coalition. Thus after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 came the Act of Toleration of 1689, which gave limited rights to Dissenting Protestants, but not to Catholics, atheists, Unitarians or Jews.

It's easy to focus on what wasn't tolerated by the so-called Act of Toleration. But the philosophical point is crucial: to be English is not identical with being a member of the Church of England. Or, in contemporary language, *England is not Anglican*. This is the point from which any notion of England as a 'Christian country' starts to disintegrate. It's never clear when this unhelpful term is used how broad a definition of 'Christian' is in play, and it's doubtful if the use of the word 'Christian' as an adjective rather than a noun is ever wise; but what became evident through the traumas of the seventeenth century was that either the English had to give up on all being part of the same church, or they had to face the reality of perpetual civil war. Given that few Protestants regarded Catholics as Christians in this era,

and yet came to understand not being Church of England as not involving inherent treason, this is a huge cultural and social shift. But it's one that some members of the Church of England have yet to digest.

Chapter five engages with what we might think of as the ideals of England. John Constable's paintings, like *The Hay Wain* and *The Cornfield*, portray a whole society at peace with itself and at peace with creation. But these were painted in the 1820s, when the Industrial Revolution was in full swing, and the economy of the nation was shifting from the countryside to the towns. You could say neither the church nor much of the population has come to terms with the change. Today the English love the countryside and long for its tranquillity; but few of them live there. The Industrial Revolution generated two further aspects of English identity: on the one hand it created the working classes, and, with it, mass-participation and mass-attendance sports, which arose in from the 1860s; on the other the economic wealth and dynamism that derived from innovation and skilled engineering. Out of this dynamism came the characteristics of the English that the rest of the United Kingdom and many other nations perhaps most dislike: a superiority complex, a sense of entitlement, a notion that, since so many things began or were invented in England, they should belong here, a conviction that the world speaks English because English and the English are best and thus that they may legitimately expect everyone to do business on their terms, and an assumption that there was a happier time when most of the global map was coloured red.

Perhaps the most exasperating to those who identify with such convictions is the smallness of England today by comparison with the greatness of the heritage it claims for itself. That greatness is inclined to focus on the myth of the ever-victorious warrior nation. The definitive war is the Second World War – noble, righteous and successful, with the backs-to-the-wall quality of the Battle of Britain to boot. But Wellington's victory at Waterloo and Nelson's at Trafalgar, let alone Henry V's at Agincourt, conjure a similar sense of pride and glory. Inglorious defeats are not simply kept quiet; they are unknown. Who among the defeated for example ever reflects on the Battle of Saratoga in 1777, after which America was lost? Or Isandlwana in 1879, when the Zulus humiliated their colonial rivals? Or Gazala in 1942, where Rommel humbled the Eighth Army? The point is that English history, whether in industrial, sporting, or military terms, is much more complex than is often perceived. This chapter might be called *England is not static*.

Again the same is true of the Church of England. The past isn't always rural, isn't always dynamic, and isn't always victorious. The church's relationship with the people is abiding, but never to be taken for granted; close, but never stable; longstanding, but never unchanging. English is not the language of Jesus, of the Bible, or of the worldwide church. There is no entitlement. When people lament the supposed decline of the Church of England, it's sometimes in the same tone of voice that decries the demise of England's place in the world; it's more than possible that a smaller, more truthful and humble country could be the setting for a more authentic, gracious and inclusive church.

Chapter six follows in the same vein. What goes up must come down: Isaac Newton's third law of physics had an unforeseen application in postcolonial England. As the Empire began seriously to shrink, so citizens of the former colonies started to migrate to England. England needed the labour; and meanwhile it was hard to say that it was fine for the English to migrate to rule other countries, but other countries' citizens could not migrate to live here. The title of this chapter is the simple result of that reversal: *England is not white*. It goes

without saying that the bygone England for which many pine was one heavy-laden with class and gender stratifications and straitjackets; but it's also important to recognise that it was beset with hierarchical and oppressive race assumptions too. Such prejudices and expectations are by no means entirely a thing of the past. Which is why it's so important to dispel the identification between being English and being white.

Perhaps the most poignant place to discover what being English means today is to ask a minority-ethnic woman. And the same is true of what it means to be a member of the Church of England. Because if the church simply replicates the race, class and gender assumptions of the more reactionary quarters of the national culture then it really hasn't got a gospel that deserves to be proclaimed. But if its gospel really is good news to a person whose place of ancestral origin was a colony, whose race is consistently degraded and whose gender is constantly a matter for scrutiny and comment, then that truly is a gospel of which to be proud.

And the final chapter is the one with which I began – the one that has been the focus of so much attention in this decade of the two referenda, about the United Kingdom and about Europe. This last chapter is called *England is not Britain*. Much to the fury and dismay of the Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish, English people frequently use the terms England, Britain and the UK interchangeably, and sing God Save the Queen at events that are strictly English in character, habits that are at least thoughtless if not overtly oppressive. Such patterns of speech and action disclose a remarkable confidence that being mistakenly described as English could only be a benign experience, and an extraordinary lack of empathy with identities closely related but different from one's own. One of the most fascinating controversies to arise this year in General Synod (a forum used to controversy but unaccustomed to being fascinating), was whether the Church of England feels it has more in common with the Scottish Episcopal Church, which is small, but part of the worldwide Anglican Communion, or with the Church of Scotland, which is the established church, but is Presbyterian. The debate raised profound identity questions about the nature of both Anglicanism and establishment.

So that's our seven-chapter story of England. England is not native, stable, unified, Anglican, static, white, or Britain. But there are two things England nonetheless is. It is, and has been, albeit for less than 100 years, a democracy, and the struggles to make it so go to the heart of the nation. And it is, and has been, for over a thousand years, minus 11 tortured years in the seventeenth century, a monarchy. To be both a monarchy and a democracy seems to many foreigners and some natives an oxymoron. But it's among the paradoxes that make England work; it represents the harmony of tradition and reason that's most characteristically English. And it is not in its glorious history or magnificent landscapes but in the reign of one, who wishes only to enable the flourishing of all, and who lets those all grow in power and creativity and joy, that England comes closest to an image of the ways of God.