

Sermon preached at St James's Piccadilly London

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“We can’t go on. We must go on.”

There’s an old Jewish joke about a bickering husband and wife that come to the rabbi for counselling. The rabbi with his disciple by his side first listens to the wife’s complaints about her no-good husband, and the rabbi says, “You know, you’re right.”

Then comes the husband and the rabbi listens to his complaints about the wife, and the rabbi says, “you know, you’re right.”

The rabbi’s disciple is perplexed. As soon as the couple leaves the study, he says: “Rabbi, I don’t understand. You say to the wife “you’re right.” And to the husband, “you’re right.” Rabbi, they can’t both be right! The rabbi says, “you know, you’re right.”

One thing Anglican Christians share with our Jewish friends is the ability to laugh at ourselves. Self-deprecation is very much at the heart of what it means to be Anglican. Not because we don’t take ourselves seriously. The ongoing conflicts between different parts of Anglicanism are there, if nothing else, to remind us that we do take ourselves seriously. But we also refuse to take ourselves too seriously.

And we recognise that as Anglicans we are especially good at turning over a problem, this way and that, in an attempt to see it from different directions, even from seemingly opposing angles. We are always looking for some unrecognised possibility. We want to exhaust all possibilities before making a final call.

Among the many events in public and political life over the past week or so was the release of the Chilcot Report. One of the conclusions it reached was that the options for a peaceful resolution with Iraq in 2003

were not exhausted. War was not the last resort. Anglicans will always look for yet another approach, another way into a problem.

For some, this makes Anglican Christianity something like that Rabbi in the joke: never ready with some final sense of commitment and conviction. They see this as a weakness. **And maybe, in some sense, you know, they’re right.**

But in fact—the gift particular to Anglican Christians—is that somehow **we have managed to turn a weakness into a virtue.** And, it is precisely our ability to see the merit of opposing views that reveals a confidence and resilience particular to our practice of the Christian faith. So we never just say “**you know you’re right**” and leave it at that. Anglican dialogue always follow things up with “**but on the other hand...**”

The strength of our conviction is that—no matter how terminal a problem appears to be—there is always more to be said, there are always more avenues to explore, **more possibilities to be uncovered and realised.** And so live from the conviction that our views can only ever be penultimate, never final.

This is why, as Anglicans, we simply refuse anything that will shut down dialogue. You might say that to be Anglican is to be always prepared for further dialogue—including the possibility of **further, passionate dialogue with those with whom we disagree most.**

That is not the way of politics. And we are continually reminded that, in politics, it is easier to characterise the views of one’s opponents in stark black and white

contrasts. We are by now all too familiar with the false caricatures that say that if you voted for Brexit, you must be anti-immigration and xenophobic. Or, on the other hand, that if you voted for staying in Europe, you were unwittingly selling British independence down the river. But Anglicans, and specially when it comes to church matters, simply resist anything that would shut down lines of communication. And you might as well say that as Anglicans we like to have it both ways: given a choice between “either / or,” we’ll typically say, no thank you, and we will go for the “both / and” option. **In other words, we like our tea. But sometimes only coffee will do.**

I think this is precisely the approach we need to understand our Gospel passage in which we find Jesus at the house of Mary and Martha.

Sadly, the way Bible commentators have traditionally read this passage completely misses the point. **The point of the passage is, of course, that the Jesus the rabbi makes a fine Anglican:** he refuses to choose between Mary and Martha and instead says “**yes, Martha, what you do is important, ... but on the other hand, Mary is doing what is right for her.**”

Unfortunately, this passage is usually read as an opposition of two kinds of people: the Marys and the Marthas of this world. You’ve heard it before: Martha is the practical doer who busies herself in the kitchen; Mary, we are told, is the paragon of learning and contemplation who sits at Jesus’ feet.

Inevitably, showing up this competing contrast leads to the conclusion that spiritual **matters come above the needs of everyday life.** But that logic, in fact, simply replicates the error that Jesus himself points out to Martha: and in fact we’ll see how— if Martha represents the activist and Mary the thoughtful contemplative—the Gospel

passage simply refuses to elevate one disciple over the other.

But let me back up a step....

When I was at theological college, I spent countless hours learning the biblical languages: I absolutely loved Old Testament Hebrew and Aramaic. But I had quite a time learning New Testament Greek. I was absolutely determined, however. So I made up hundreds of these flash cards tied with a steel ring to help me learn vocabulary and difficult grammar. I probably had more fun cutting up and writing flashcards than seminarians do today downloading their entire Greek and Hebrew bibles into their smart phones. But it wasn’t all a waste of time.

All that time learning the biblical languages did confirm for me how absolutely reliable our English translations of the Bible are. More often than not, you can get just as much out of a biblical passage by comparing several modern English translations, reading them side-by-side, as you do by poring over the passage in the original languages.

But there are rare exceptions. So for example when there is a play on words in the original text. That doesn’t make it into our English translations. And there’s a play on words at the heart of this passage that points to the absolutely equal value that Jesus gives to each of the two women who each have their own inclinations and attributes.

The reading begins by saying that when Jesus entered the village, “**Martha welcomed Jesus into her house....**” We are in Martha’s household that she shares with her sister Mary. We met them both at the raising of their brother Lazarus. Here, Martha **welcomes** Jesus into her house. Anyone who has had the good fortune to be a guest in a home in an Israeli or an Arab culture knows the central place that food

hospitality. It is impossible to be a guest in a house in those parts of the world without having a full meal begin laid on, or, depending on the time of the day, at least tea and sweets and cakes that signal a warm welcome. For Martha, the rituals of meal preparations are part of the act of welcoming Jesus into her home. Martha **welcomed** Jesus into her home.

The word for **welcome** in the original text is echoed by a sound-alike word in the verse that tells us that Mary **chose** to sit with Jesus, and so chose what was best for her.... So we hear that Martha **welcomed** Jesus, and Mary **chose** Jesus: in the Greek, it sounds like this: **ὑπεδέξατο**¹ and **ἐξελέξατο**.²

Jesus does not prefer one over the other. Both women are doing what is right. Martha was right in choosing the show of hospitality. And Mary did what was right for her by sitting down to learn as a disciple of Jesus. It is wrong of Martha to question Mary for choosing according to what was best for her at that time. And when the original hearers of this Gospel heard **ὑπεδέξατο** and **ἐξελέξατο** they would have immediately picked that Jesus validates both women and theologically puts them on an equal footing from this play on words.

You can see why I think this passage needs an Anglican reading. Among Jesus' disciples, the acts of welcoming and of attentive learning each have their place.

Anglicans are very much like Christians of other traditions. We are formed by habits of mind and possessed by conviction of the heart. But a particularly Anglican trait is the convictions is that **the voice of reason is a common good, it is not something which is**

¹ ὑποδέχομαι : I receive as a guest, entertain provide hospitably, make someone welcome.

² ἐκλέγομαι : I pick out for myself, choose, elect, select. I select or choose by a highly deliberate choice (i.e. real heart-preference) with a definite purpose and outcome.

the privilege of anyone one individual. And therefore dialogue is necessary. And so is the distinctly painful process of forging a Christian conscience in the anvil of relationships. And so for the sake of good, honest, and open relationships, we insist on robust debate and, where necessary, civility in disagreement.

This is not an easy ethic to live by. Learning how to “disagree well” takes time, and it can lead to frustratingly protracted conversations, and to the deferment of final decision-making. This is where we find ourselves, for example, in the debates about same-sex marriage in the church. And it is where we were for years on women bishops.

For some outside our tradition, this practice of open-ended dialogue often looks like lack of conviction. **But, in fact, being able to say, “You know, you’re right: but, on the other hand...” is a source of strength for our community.**

And the world needs the openness of spirit and mind we as Anglicans take for granted.

We have lived a week that has brought us, once again, face to face with the realisation that we live in an age of terror. But you and I refuse to shut down conversation. **And we refuse most of all any toxic rhetoric about “us” versus “them”. We remain a community of openness, of strength in diversity, of respect and dignity that goes far beyond mere tolerance of those we disagree with.**

This is in fact where our interest in dialogue with people of other religious convictions and practices comes from. And it is why it was important for this church of St James's to host an interfaith Iftar dinner attended by the mayor of London many other others in expression of common ground held between Christians and Muslims in London.

Yesterday I conducted a baptism in this church. And after the service, one of the guests approached me and said, "I am not at all a Christian. But I have to tell you, that was the most beautiful service. I see why you do this."

An older woman also spoke to me saying, "This is only the second time in my life I've been to a baptism. Once was when I was a child. I am not a person to walk into a church. But this has been a bad week. We need a world of turned to love and mutual understanding. We need peace in the world. That's why I knew I needed to be here. And now I know why this church is here."

I think she speaks for many of us. And I hope I speak for all of us in saying that I know why you and I are here: to live in faith the redeeming qualities of a contradiction.

When the terror and tragedy of the world say, "We can't go on..."

When the world in its threats, fears and instabilities says, "We can't go on..."

We come this week with lives that say, "**We can't go on. We must go on. We'll go on.**"

Amen.

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