



Transition, Struggle, Welcome, and Change

I would like to say something about what it means to be a church that welcomes all, without exception. For that is what it means to be the Church, full stop. And being welcoming of all without exception is what it means to be a church of England in particular. And let me locate these remarks in the experience of this church of St James's Piccadilly. For here, to be a church of welcome and unconditional hospitality to all is to live out something of the grace Christ himself extends to us, weaving out of our diversity to one faith, one Church, under one God.

Let me also personalise my remarks: there are few things that sadden me more as a human, let alone as a Christian, and as a priest, than when I hear – and I hear it more often that I would like – that an LGBT person was, at some point, somewhere, turned away from a church.

The Christian worship leader Vicky Beeching has spoken openly of her rejection from churches that previously welcomed her and her music before she began to speak about being LGBT. Beeching speaks of the pain of her rejection in her recent book, *Undivided: Coming Out, Becoming Whole, And Living Free From Shame* (2018). And she has simply come to the conclusion that,

“For me, the answer has been that I’ve had to stop attending churches that hold non-affirming theology [of people like me]” ... “I can’t be there anymore; it’s too painful”
(<https://goo.gl/83T9m1>)

Let’s be clear about one thing: Jesus turns away no one. On the contrary, Jesus knew only too well, – as today’s Gospel text tells us, – what it was to be “without honour in his home town,” to be rejected “among his own kin,” to be turned down “in his own house.” But for that reason, and by definition, the Church is a living picture of Christ’s embrace.

Let me paint this local and personal picture of Christ’s embrace against a bigger backdrop. For St James’s, few in numbers as we are, daring to be a church that welcomes all happens in a wider context. You and I gather here as part of a minority of people in churches today. The idea of Christians in the minority was unthinkable when there was a vision of the parish church existing for all in previous generations, when everyone, with only some exceptions, was Christian and almost all were Church of England.

I owe this reminder that that was the Church that was to Simon Buckley, of St Anne’s Soho, in a recent address on diversity to clergy at the Speaker’s House of the House of Commons (<https://goo.gl/fBNmBE>). He reminded us also what the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, reflecting on the changing spiritual life in the 20th century, would never let us forget: that the Church’s call to be in the world and not of it, a call to be distinct and countercultural, always included the call to speak of Christ to the very people it had estranged from the Church.

Change had come to the church, not by initiative from the institutions of the Church. But from two irreversible realities: on the one hand, populations in which most people could be assumed to be Christian were quickly becoming a thing of the past; on the other hand, the need for social change and inclusion and equality for all people in all areas of life, was no longer a collection of minority concerns: equality was and continues to be a struggle for all, at all levels of human experience.

Rahner prophetically and pointedly saw transition and struggle at the heart of the changing church:

“our present situation is one of transition from a Church sustained by a homogenously Christian society ... to a church made up of those who have struggled against their environment in order to reach a clear, explicit and responsible decision of faith.”

Some read in this judgement about how things ought to change and could be, not simply on things as observed by the theologian from a distance. Rahner was no innocent bystander. Transition was another way of saying loss of faith in institutions. People were no longer willing to follow without question the authority the church had assumed for itself over time. And transition was a synonym for the turn away from abstract doctrines to the search of God in the experience, questions, and convictions of real people living real lives.

In our Gospel passage, when Jesus takes up his ministry, the response of the people in his own congregation is “Just who does he think he is: he is only a carpenter’s son. We know his family. We know his kind!” For Jesus, that was rather the point: he lived real struggles, among real relationships and lives.

Struggle in a changing Church speaks of people who, with their own efforts and out of their own suffering began to shape our churches along their questions, their concerns, their experience, their convictions, their conscience. It speaks, in other words, of people who began to seize a Church that was always already theirs.

Now all of this sounds abstract, detached, and impersonal. And we have to ask, what does struggle, conviction, and conscience look like in the faith of real people? And today, specially, what does it look like for LGBT people in the church?

We will hear that in a moment, lives and stories of courage, commitment, and compassion, from members of our own congregation.

But let me simply, reiterate what we hope to say, – one way or another, – each and every day that we welcome people into this church, and specially so today, on Pride Sunday:

Who you are matters.
Who you love matters.
The story you bring with you matters.
The God you believe in, matters.
The God you thought refused to believe in you, the God you are not sure about, matters.
You matter to go God, so you matter to us.

And so, here at St James’s, we are explicit in our unconditional welcome to the LGBT community. This something we believe is only right for the Church, full stop. But it is specially right for our church when the Church of England sends out mixed and confusing messages about what it means to be LGBT and Christian in our churches today.

St James’s is far from perfect, but it is diverse. And embracing diversity brings us to a faith which, I pray, inscribes in every face you meet, a word of welcome, a gesture that values, ultimately, your story, your message, your struggle.

I pray that the music, the prayers, the ‘relaxed dignity’ of gathering around the altar to share communion, ... that this worship space that touches everyone and excludes no one, ... is for you today, Christ’s embrace in a church which is already and always yours.

Ivan Khovacs

[Stories followed from LGBT members of St James’s Piccadilly.]