



the truth about love

It was a busy day for newsrooms on Friday. Theresa May was meeting Donald Trump for the first time and commentators were obsessed about body language, looking for clues to their future relationship, noticing that for a short time at the White House they actually held hands and then at the press conference, analysing every word, every glance, every move. Since then of course events have moved on too with the closing of US borders and subsequent legal challenges and mass protests.

But on that same Friday, buried slightly underneath such a Trumpy week, our church, the Church of England, also held a press conference, which addressed the theme of body language of sorts. The language of bodies as expressed in human sexuality, marriage, close personal relationships. It was a statement about where our church has got to in its consideration of who we now know human beings are; greatly more varied than a hetero normative culture has assumed up to now.

The bishops' report has tried to address some of the presenting issues that have come out of the shared conversations held over the past three years regarding the church's culture and belief regarding sexuality. This especially in the light now of marriage being a legal option for people of the same sex since the Marriage Act of 2013. The last major church report on sexuality was published in 1991 – 26 years ago - when marriage wasn't even mentioned – which shows how quickly things have changed.

And so the General Synod will meet in 3 weeks' time here in Westminster to discuss what the Bishops have said. And what have they said? There were some rather inaccurate headlines it seemed to me – but as is often the case, the Bishops have tried to say two sets of things in parallel.

They have said that “a fresh tone and culture of welcome and support” for LGBT people is necessary in the church. They have suggested that the Church should express repentance for homophobic attitudes. They have committed to

further study of all kinds that will help the church understand the variety and breadth of human sexuality and they have said that this will inform future teaching. They have said they want to affirm and celebrate people who are single and want to explore further deepening the theology of friendship.

In parallel, they have also said that the Church's definition of marriage will not change, and that its teaching on sexual conduct outside that relationship of marriage will not change either. That the conversations had with men and women offering themselves for ordination will be the same with heterosexual candidates as with LGBT candidates, and that clergy are expected to abide by this teaching – which is celibacy outside heterosexual marriage - whether they identify as LGBT or not.

There are some things they have not said – for example they've not said that they will explore further what celibacy is; that it is in itself a calling, and not to be used simply as a way of stopping certain people having sex.

The report talks a lot about “tone and register” and is explicit about saying that the Bishops themselves do not agree on this issue. It also describes itself as intentionally provisional, in that it doesn't try to provide an answer or definitive endpoint, but is recommending some next steps which will include further guidance for clergy who want to hold services of celebration for same sex couples. The report says in its introduction, that for many people this is a difficult read. Some of its theology is couched in terms that I found deepened my understanding, some was profoundly challenging. Some of it seemed to read less like a reaching out to members of the church and more like a plea for the church to have sympathy for the bishops themselves trying to hold things together.

But in the background to this report are three years of shared conversations that have involved some really courageous people who identify as LGBT, baring their souls, telling their personal stories to make sure that the bishops' and

synods' deliberations have been informed by real life. Some have found this a good experience. Others have had to listen to some, at the very least, unpalatable things said to them and about them and have found it a bruising experience. It has to be said too, that there have been some very conservative participants in the conversations who have encountered extremely challenging stories for them. But, as the American bishop Gene Robinson said some time ago, in these kinds of conversations, the relative contributions of gay and straight people are not equal. They are, he said, like the contributions to a bacon and egg breakfast of the pig and the chicken. The chicken is involved, but the pig has to be committed.

Despite our gratitude that in the UK, we have a political system which, however recently, states unequivocal equality before the law of people of a variety of sexualities, we have to acknowledge that just as powerful as the legal, economic, political arrangements that shape our society are the songs, the stories, the myths, the mood music, that are more difficult to define but form the contours of our life together. And every time that a church report or pronouncement is made about people who identify as LGBT, it is vital that churches like ours stand up and say that everyone - *everyone* - is welcome and cherished in this place and that we believe anywhere where people love, *without exception*, God is there and God blesses that love and those relationships.

Because in a church that takes God and people seriously, we must acknowledge that countering the inevitably cool vocabulary of the report are the tender hearts of people who are looking for someone to love. And *those who live in love live in God and God lives in them* (1 John 4.16 from the marriage service). In amongst the discussions about canon law are broken-hearted clergy who continue to bless the relationships they are not permitted to have. Hidden in the ecclesiastical politics lies the presence of a God to whom as we say *all desires are known. All desires are known*. Amid the recommendations and next steps is the Scriptural insistence (1 Corinthians 13) that love is greater even than faith.

And erupting into this mixture of politics, debate, vulnerable sexualities, ardent faith and brokenheartedness comes today's gospel – this wedding at Cana, this place of pledging and promising, the sounds of celebration and the familiar arguments of extended family. This wedding; this taking of vows, this possibility of

happiness, the giving of ourselves into another's mercy, this mutual, reciprocal, dedicated love used throughout Scripture as a way of describing Christ's covenant with the church, God's covenant with people. This is our good news for today.

And we always read it in the season of Epiphany – the season of miracles, wonder, glory, light, astonishment.

It's a wedding.

And we know that weddings – straight or gay - are complicated events. Some there are just unadulteratedly happy. Some family are relieved; some are afraid of the change it will mean. Witnessing someone promise themselves to someone else is sometimes extremely painful alongside the joy. For some at a wedding, they remember the vows they themselves have broken or the betrayals they have experienced. For some they simply can't understand why this hasn't yet happened to them. And for some, the combination of needing to be loved and it just not happening, is almost too much to bear.

Close relationships, marriages, civil partnerships, pledged relationships are both beautiful and irreducibly hard.

And John's gospel, as we said a couple of weeks ago, is there to be read in layers, layer after layer of meaning, a little like desire for a lover, a mixture of delight, regret, yearning and fear - that is found - at a wedding.

John's gospel is full of signs. And their overarching purpose is to point all of us who listen to the presence of God in this life. To show the ways in which in this life, God is made flesh; signs to show us that the source of Jesus's life is the divine life and so to show us that **this life is God's life** given to us to live. We are living a life that has holy origins and holy purpose; which can be summed up in God's irresistible invitation to love one another as we love ourselves.

So when we hear the story of the water becoming wine at the wedding, we get into wondering about miracles and magic and we get anxious about trying to explain it. But the meaning is not dependent on such details. Our anxiety comes often from an assumption that we think God is like us only bigger, because that's all we can imagine. But John's gospel – these signs he keeps writing about – are to show us that God is not like us only bigger; if God was that, then we should be very, very afraid if God is powerful enough to, for example, change water into wine.

Because we know how easily that power could be abused.

When we hear the glory of the astonishing and profligate gallons and gallons of wine, we hear the story and smell the wine as we hear all the stories about Jesus, through the story of the cross; the wine is the wine of suffering – we will share it together later in this service. God's power and glory finds its most powerful meaning in the cross. It is power but not as we might use it. It is love but not as we keep trying to define it. It is glory but not a glorifying of the only power we know which is ours.

When we say that God is love, that God is powerful or glorious, we are saying that God is all these things in the shattering figure of God on the cross.

The temptation of believing in a God of supreme power and authority – like us only bigger - is that we co-opt God's power to bolster our own projects, attitudes, opinions and plans. The cross shatters that co-option and will not allow us to believe in a God with a magic wand. Because if we do try to discern the truth of God's power – power even to change water into wine, then we

will be led to the cross. To be in solidarity with all those who are splintered by life, who are suffering because of another's cruelty; to be in solidarity with those parts of ourselves that are devastated, or frightened, lonely or betrayed.

Human relationships are a daily conundrum, whether we're single, married, partnered, willingly alone, unwillingly single, isolated or happy or trapped. Our attempts to be close to another person often takes us to the edge of ourselves; more than we can take. Human relationships bring out the very best and the very worst of our own behaviour; and reveal our conundrums about power, and sexual desire, our need to be loved and accepted, our longing to give ourselves away.

And the glory of the good news of the gospel for us today is that it is right in that real-life complex maelstrom of emotion and hope and suffering..... that God comes to pour wine from water jars for youto tell you the truth about love. Amen.

Lucy Winkett