

SERMON 12 Feb 2017 | 3rd before Lent
1 Corinthians 3.1-9; Matthew 5.21-37
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It shouldn't be this difficult. Church, sexuality and bishops

It can be a damn hard thing to live peaceably in this world. We seem always to be having to navigate our way amidst misunderstandings, awkward differences and a perplexing diversity of opinions of this kind or that, with neighbours, friends, institutions and traditions.

Conflict is everywhere, and not just with others but within ourselves also. Sure, there are seemingly serene people who appear unaffected by these things and make an effortless progress through it all. Some of them are the real thing (and to be envied and learnt from); others are surely repressed, or medicated maybe, in denial or disconnected, or more like the proverbial duck who appears to glide over the water with grace whilst its legs are paddling, out of sight, like crazy.

Why is it that conflict, friction of some sort or other at some level or other, seems virtually ever-present in human affairs? It must, in part, be linked to our strong sense of self (often the vulnerable self) and to that reptilian part of our brains which still scans the horizon for threats or the opportunity to make the first strike.

We might hazard a guess that the industrial revolution ushered in a new mood music which prized competition and the pursuit of success at the expense of others above preceding patterns of local communities with more rhythmic cycles to life. Whatever good has spun out of that historical development (and there are many) a more peaceable world is not obviously one of them.

So-called 'identity' politics can add to the range of conflict. This is where people group and lobby and adopt positions based on perspectives related to their identity: typically reflecting class, ethnicity, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation or that supremely tricky customer, religion. Recently we appear to have witnessed 'anti-identity' groupings, new blocks united not so much by what they share but by a varied sense of being excluded, left behind and disenfranchised, reduced to seeing no alternative but to deliver a reactionary body blow to the imagined consensus. Think of the Brexit result and the US presidential election.

A new round in the Church of England's conflict over sexual orientation has been jamming the Anglican blog-o-sphere. Two weeks ago Lucy mentioned the release of a report from the House of Bishops. It followed two years of 'facilitated' conversations in each diocese which brought together church-goers to talk about sexuality.

This exercise spun out of something called the Pilling Report of 2013 which considered the place of gay people in the church and in summary said: scripture is authoritative, but people sincerely disagree about what Scripture means for us today with regard to same-sex relationships, so we'll have to learn to disagree about this issue and start that by a process of "facilitated conversations".

The exercise was well planned and resourced – it cost £360,000 – and even has

its own website. Many LGBT people participated, taking the risk of being open to others with highly different views. But now the exercise has concluded and the conversations have ceased and the House of Bishops has approved a report produced by a small subset of its number. It is due to be considered at this week's meeting of the General Synod, the Church of England's parliament made up of three Houses: laity, clergy and bishops.

Broadly, the report is good news for traditionalists and disappointing news for (let's call them) progressive liberal Christians and for LGBT people (although the 'T' aspect was not part of the focus, nor really was the 'B'; it is about the question of the church's gay and lesbian sons and daughters).

I have been struck by the differences between commentators in what they make of this report. If you are interested in getting a flavour, look at the *Thinking Anglicans* website.

There are two principal findings from the bishops: first, that the definition of marriage contained in church law (Canon B30 if you wish to find it) should remain unchanged; namely *'that of a permanent, lifelong union, for better for worse, till death do them part, of one man with one woman, to the exclusion of all others, for the procreation of children, for the hallowing and right direction of the natural instincts and affections, and for the mutual society, help and comfort which the one ought to have for the other, both in prosperity and adversity'*.

And the second that a *'new fresh tone and culture of welcome and support for lesbian and gay people (and for their families) should be established'*.

Clergy may continue to 'pray informally with same sex couples, including following a civil partnership' but should not explicitly bless such relationships. They may not create services for these purposes. LGBT clergy in civil partnerships are not at liberty to convert these to marriage, and if they do they are open to discipline.

I mention this latest official pronouncement for several reasons. The first and briefest is that Synod will be considering this on Wednesday, here in London at Church House. It is what is called a 'take note' debate: synod is asked to vote in favour of 'taking note' of it, and thereby giving the bishops a signal that the direction of travel is supported. So please pray for wisdom and openness to God's stirrings for all those involved.

The second reason for mentioning it is that the church seems to have something of a track record in talking *about* others whilst not giving those others a voice (it is not alone in this).

In our world, what passes for public discourse and pronouncements, in both words and images, is very powerful in the subliminal messages they convey.

When I was a boy in Nottinghamshire the airwaves and TV screens were populated mainly by plummy Home Counties voices from 'down South' (a universe away, as it seemed to me) and all the important voices were male and – this hardly needs saying – white. I have no doubt that this, and the structures that gave rise to it, shaped my thinking, shaped everyone's thinking. In relation to LGBT people (the phrase was still decades away) not only were they themselves never heard, all references pointed to how toxic and bad they were. The impact this had on young people discovering they were LGBT (I was one of them) was profound and harmful. Many of

these messages, explicit and implicit, remain current today, though moderated by great and, as I see them, positive shifts in public attitudes.

There are other obvious groups of our sisters and brothers in Christ when considering these questions of speaking for ourselves or being spoken about: people of colour, women, people with disabilities.

Let me tell you something that may be shocking: the church is not God's Kingdom on Earth. It is not consistently wise. It is not infallible. It is the community of faith – it is *communities* of faith.

It sails through time speaking of the Nazarene Jesus in whom we believe God made a unique disclosure about God's purpose and presence. But it is an institution, prone to the weaknesses of both institutions and the conflicted people who are often drawn to them and to seek influence in them.

Since that regrettable accommodation with Constantine, which made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, the church has had too close a relationship with secular power. It is a model that has tended to oppress the groups I have mentioned: people of colour; women; minorities including sexual minorities. *And it has tended to oppress truth.*

This accommodation with secular power is so pervasive and invisible that any truly radical engagement with the Gospels is pretty darned impossible. But not entirely! (And if you are interested in exceptions to the norm as a starter I recommend *A Reader in Radical Christianity* edited by Andrew Bradstock and Christopher Rowland for a run through of some of the people and movements within the church that have better grasped the disconcerting surprises,

demands, possibilities, promises and consolations of the Gospel).

The House of Bishops paper on the place of gay and lesbian people in the Church of England did not surprise me but it has been a disappointment. It looks as if they have prized doctrine, its historic interpretation and church unity above other claims. I have been a little shocked to see the depth of hurt expressed by many Anglican bloggers on the 'pro' LGBT side, and it made me realise that like many LGBT people I had become inured to, accustomed to, being the embarrassing relation, the one without quite the same claim to a seat at God's banquet.

Much of all this – this conflict which Christians experience – is down to two things. The obvious one is how we read scripture. Is it to be read literally or metaphorically; did it leave God's editorial desk in an absolutely finalised perfected form or is it a collection of the work of many people over many centuries trying to speak as truthfully and fully as they were able of the God they encountered in the circumstances of their day?

It is interesting that if you were to read Canon B30 on marriage and also go back to this morning's gospel, you might just wonder how these square with the church's attitude today towards divorce and to re-marriage and indeed to re-marriage in church. Re-readings and changes are possible.

The second reason that helps explain the kerfuffle Christians are in over this question is that we are to a great extent *taught* to hate. We like to flatter ourselves that the things we condemn we condemn because we have arrived at the position by a thoughtful process. Rarely so. We are largely taught these things by the explicit and implicit messages we are given as

children (indeed, often as adults), both by caregivers and wider society and of course by religion. This explains racist attitudes, misogynist ones, and what has become termed homophobia. The disdain many people feel towards others because of ethnicity, gender or orientation and identity or poverty *are taught*. And the marvellous news is that *we can unlearn* those as we move into truer perceptions.

But before we move into those truer perceptions we are likely to need to reflect on our earlier learning and to try and uncover in our hearts any misplaced thirst for certainty over uncertainty and the way in which our insecurities are misleadingly quelled by having people, groups, classes safely labelled inferior in some way or other. It's hugely comforting, in an entirely bad way, to have others we can look down on, even through the lens of Christian compassion.

I understand the view that God has spoken unambiguously and says that LGBT people fall short of a glorious heterosexual, traditional ideal. I understand it, but don't believe it. I could no more believe it than believe that the world is flat. I remind myself of arguments that have been marshalled in the past to maintain white superiority and to keep women in a structurally subordinate place in society.

We must be wary of words contradicted by action, and so have some doubt about what is meant by a report which says 'no change' yet also calls for a "fresh tone and culture of welcome and support for lesbian and gay people" – people for whom the church offers only 'informal prayers' and feels hesitant to formally bless or celebrate their serious relationships: relationships which are entered into by the participants (these words may sound familiar) as a permanent, lifelong union, for better for worse, till death do them part ...to the exclusion of all

others....for the hallowing and right direction of *their* natural instincts and affections, and for the mutual society, help and comfort which the one ought to have for the other, both in prosperity and adversity.

If you have extensive experience of other churches you may realise how wonderful and godly is the community of mutual acceptance we have here at St James's. If you don't have that experience of the wider church you may be surprised by what you find. We are not a perfect community (thank God) but for three decades and more the question of whether someone is LGBT or not has assumed a status of absolutely no material importance.

The church is called to be a place of love and action, and to do its very best always to present to the world a true expression of God's abundant love and limitless generosity, to show that perfect love does indeed cast our fear but also – marvellously - frees us from our learned disdain and fear for others and their difference. As Paul says in today's first reading: For we are God's servants, working together: you are God's field, God's building.