



## no one stands alone

Let us not grow weary in doing what is right.

The sight of what estimates say was a million and a half people out on the streets of London yesterday supporting 30,000 people marching was amazing: colourful, noisy, musical, humorous, exuberant – is an annual sight that is by turns inspiring, hugely encouraging and, well, just fun. So many people. So many different people. Possibly my favourite banner was one that declared 'if you're reading this, you're gay'.

And I find it incredibly moving to be part of such a sea of humanity, flowing through the streets like volcano lava, erupting in a determination to say we are all human beings, deeply connected to one another; Bob Marley had it right didn't he – One Love. Let's get together and feel all right.

Some will be regretting the commercialisation of Pride: rainbow coffee cups, Barclay's bank being one of the main sponsors, the so-called pink pound taking its place in the economy as spending power exercised by people identifying as LGBTQ+ just grows stronger with prosperity.

Others will see this commercialisation as a sort of acceptance hard won and long yearned for. Never in my lifetime would I have thought that Tesco's would be so full of rainbows.

This year is the 50th anniversary of the raid on the Stonewall club in New York City at the end of June 1969. After a police raid, what then followed was called either the Stonewall riots, or the Stonewall uprising or the Stonewall rebellion – depending on what side you were on.

50 years later in New York City and in London and all over the world, a march – an uprising – a rebellion – hopefully these days not a riot except of colour – has become an annual expression of ... well what? Discussion continues about Pride: should it be a carnival or a protest? How mainstream should it be, who should sponsor it and so on.

The term pride is attributed to one of the people who was there 50 years ago at the Stonewall club when it was raided. A remarkable trans woman called Sylvia Rivera who made a speech that night in Christopher Street in Manhattan village during the riots.

As one of her interpreters said when she died in 2002, *She may have been the prototypical Angry Queen. Unbowed, unbought, and virtually indigestible by a gay movement she helped birth.*

Sylvia Rivera's presence in that first generation of Stonewall activists was to say the least bracing. As a trans woman, she challenged again and again the inclusivity of the gay activists. She wanted gender identity to be front and centre alongside sexual orientation. In one of her obituaries, it said *Sylvia Rivera went out as she lived: struggling to get gender issues on the map. She was hooked up to monitors, IVs, and a morphine pump last Sunday when local gay activists stopped by the intensive care unit to ask her advice. Mortally ill, she held back the night long enough to give them hell one last time for not being inclusive enough. She died only hours later, at just 50 years old: a unique lady for a unique time. (Riki Wilchins, The Village Voice February 2002)*

There is a prophetic spirit, an edgy truth telling, an explosive uncompromising inclusiveness in the spirit of Sylvia Rivera that similar to what I find in the radical message of the gospel. That the heart of the gospel is love. Simple. Made complex by us complicated human beings who need such reassurance and mercy from one another let alone from God.

But collective Christianity – especially in the form of institutional church- has been woeful in recognising and remembering that the heart of the gospel is love. It has for centuries been part of the violent infrastructure that sought to punish and destroy people like Sylvia. It's so important still to name this on a day like today. To say we got it so wrong. Get it so wrong.

Because Christians, like all human beings, are not immune to fear.

It's not always easy to be a public representative of a church that many people in this country – even in this city where many churches fly rainbow flags – believe is universally homophobic and discriminatory. Many of you have said at different times that it's been easier for you to come out at your workplace as gay than as Christian. It's important to name that right up front. And to name the church's shame in its theological shoring up of what is fear of anyone who is different from us.

And again it's so important to say, especially because much of the distress caused by the church to people who are lesbian or trans, genderqueer, gay, non binary – so much of the distress caused is because of how we read the Bible. And so for churches like ours, it is not good enough to put a rainbow flag on the altar, and leave Scriptural interpretation to those who want to say that a literal interpretation condemns any sexual identity or gender identity than a heteronormative one. And so I want to offer a reading of St Paul that I believe is faithful to its own identity as the word of God – and is also faithful to the radical heart of the gospel: which is fundamentally and irreducibly love.

I guess there are three things to take from St Paul's letter to the Galatians, which incidentally is the oldest book in the New Testament, written before the gospels.

1. First – that in the manner of Paul's teaching, in which he is incredibly open and lacerating about his own struggles, we should expect that struggle is a normal and essential part of faith. Struggling with faith, and how to live with it, within it, inspired by it, is completely normal. Not just that, but as disciples of Christ, we should expect it. And I don't just mean a cosmetic – well I'm not sure about everything I hear in church - I mean a heartbroken, sometimes furious, sometimes raging, sometimes despairing struggle where it can feel as if our very life is in peril. Christ sweated drops of blood, such was the force of his breaking heart. Jacob wrestled with the angel all night, and by daybreak was exhausted and limping. Mary the mother of Jesus found that a sword pierced her heart; Martha yelled at Jesus – “if

you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died”. If we are disciples of Christ, if we are close to the heart of God in any real life sense, then we expect to become familiar with our own tears. The psalms are full of this; “how long O Lord, how long?”; and our vengeful tendencies are, thank God, given expression in the psalms – as we might feel that we want to wreak havoc on the people who have told us that we are not acceptable to God or that God stands apart from us. Our resentment, our fury will be real. But just as when Jacob struggled all night, he was hurt by the struggle, but he prayed a prayer I have often prayed to God, and offer to you to pray too: “I will not let you go until you bless me”.

2. Second: when Paul was writing his letters – including his letter to the Galatians we heard this morning – he didn't know he was writing the Bible. He was writing a letter. This doesn't make it any less Scripture for us, but it challenges us to read it intelligently. And remember the radical change Paul had to make. Like many of us, Paul had to leave behind much of what he had been taught from his childhood religion. He embraced, accepted, eventually shouted loud about the new perspectives and insights that he had found in Christ. He had to re- assess what he had been taught about God as a child. You can hear it in the letter we heard this morning as he debates with his readers the issue of circumcision and whether for Christians it is still necessary. One of the spiritual insights of a weekend like Pride is that we are asked to let go of much of what we were taught as a child about God. It's not easy – because there is a loop tape playing in our heads: a kind of spiritual merry-go-round that we don't seem to be able to get off. Especially if you've been brought up to believe that being gay is wrong somehow, or at least even if you were taught that it was possibly ok to be gay, it wasn't ok to try to find someone to love. The astonishing strength of Paul's position is that he has allowed his faith to develop, to change, to grow into new perspectives and new insights. In this very letter to the Galatians, he writes a very creative interpretation of the identity of Abraham and the descendants of Sarah and Hagar – a creative interpretation that he later in his letter to the Romans kind of backs off from.

He insists that this is ‘what Scripture says’ even though his interpretation would be highly controversial for his readers. Paul is much more interested as he states in this letter in *how we live*, which gives us guidance in interpreting Scripture. He argues that the freedom that the Spirit brings to us as human beings translates into service of others, and that service for others is, for Paul, *essential context for the wise interpretation of Scripture*.

3. This teaching of Paul leads me to the third point I want to make on this day. Paul says we are to bear one another’s burdens. We are also asked to bear our own. He writes such poetry about this – which could have been written for a Pride service like this.

*So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all.* What can make us weary of doing what is right? Or not so much weary but sometimes fear – of criticism or attack. Sometimes fatigue – that it’s simply unbelievable that this stuff still needs to be said. Sometimes isolation – when you feel that other people don’t really quite get it – even when they say they do – even when they’re saying they support you, you are the only one who goes to your room and shuts the door and reflects on your deep human need for both intimacy and mercy.

Because of the radical teaching of Paul in incredibly challenging circumstances, because the heart of the gospel of Christ is love, it is not just possible to say, it is vital to say that you belong here at this rainbow altar. Take a look at each other when we gather around the altar later. You belong here whether you identify as bisexual, lesbian, trans gay, genderqueer, non binary, and all of you who are not sure or don’t

know what your label is or don’t really want one; as well as every person, every person who is straight, rich or poor, single, partnered, married, curious. Every person who comes through the door on their legs, with sticks, in a wheelchair, carried in the arms of someone else, every person whatever your age or ethnic background, the colour of your skin or your life experience. You belong at this rainbow altar when you are in work, out of work, grieving, glad, anxious, contented, despairing, if your mental health is robust, if your mental health is fragile, if you are in love, or pregnant or wish you were, or worry that you don’t want to be, if you’re worried about getting older or feeling that you’re too young. It doesn’t matter what you are wearing or if you are thin or if you are big, or if you hate yourself or love the sound of your own voice. You belong here because you belong to God. Every person, every person, whoever you are and whoever you are yet to be, is loved and accepted, forgiven and free.

As well as hopefully encouraging us this morning in the manner of St Paul not to weary of doing what is right, I want to help resource us when we might grow weary of doing the right thing. And that is, in the manner of the civil rights movements around the world across time and across continents - to sing.

This song to me, is a modern day psalm; it echoes so many psalms which beg God to stay with me when I feel isolated. And it specifically says that however much money or comfort we have, these things will not fulfil us and we can still feel isolated from God because of what we have been told in the past. But the Spirit of God is to lead us to freedom, to solidarity, to generosity and grace. To a place like this at this rainbow altar here today. To a place where no one stands alone.

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*All then sang together* **WHERE NO ONE STANDS ALONE** (music and lyrics by Mosie Lister 1955)

Once I stood in the night with my head bowed low  
In the darkness as deep as the sea  
And my heart felt afraid and I cried ‘O Lord  
Don’t hide your face from me’.

**Hold my hand all the way every hour every day  
From here to the Great Unknown.**

**Take my hand, let me stand where no one stands alone.**

Like a king I may live in a palace so tall  
With great riches to call my own.  
But I don’t know a thing in this whole wide world  
That’s worse than feeling so alone.

**Hold my hand all the way every hour every day  
From here to the Great Unknown.**

**Take my hand, let me stand where no one stands alone.**