

Sunday 22nd January 2023 1 Corinthians 1:10-18, Matthew 4.12-23

Liberals and Conservatives (Mark Laynesmith)

“It has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among, my brothers and sisters”.

So writes the apostle and evangelist of early Christianity, St Paul, to the community in Greece in the city of Corinth that he had founded only a couple of years before.

“What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul’, or ‘I belong to Apollos’, or ‘I belong to Cephas’.

In assembling the jigsaw puzzle of the history of the early Christian church – so far as we *can* reconstruct it – it looks like in the months after Paul had established the little church in Corinth, other travelling evangelists had arrived; each had spoken of their faith in Jesus with a different emphasis and this had given rise to factions within the young community.

‘Apollos’ we know of elsewhere in the New Testament as a Jewish convert to Christianity who hailed from Alexandria in Egypt. Alexandria was the intellectual centre of Judaism at the time and a focus for intellectual approaches to interpreting the Old Testament that were accessible to Greek philosophy. Apollos is likely to have been exposed to many different cultures, we may presume fairly widely-read, probably a skilled speaker and therefore an intellectually curious lecturer; he may have been comfortable pushing at the boundaries of the traditional faith in ways that some hearers in Corinth would have found exciting and relevant (even his name is slightly daring – it’s related to the Greek god Apollo).

But the content and style of Apollos’ teaching may not have been to the taste of more traditional believers.

Some of these traditionalists, it appears, focused on Cephas. Cephas is the Aramaic name for Peter (here he is in a rather beautiful icon, sat by the fire whilst the cock crows). It’s interesting that his faction should use *that* version of his name rather than the Greek translation Peter, for that itself hints at their preference for older traditions). Peter was, of course, one of Jesus’s earliest followers. We can presume he’s likely to have been at entirely the opposite end of the academic and cultural spectrum from Apollos. As we heard in our Gospel reading about his calling, Peter was a fisherman; probably not quite the lowly figure we might think: more of a small businessman. He’s not likely to have anything by way of a liberal education and probably little of Apollos’s cosmopolitan, urban and culturally-diverse life experience. Peter hadn’t been to Corinth himself, of course, but early missionaries who associated with Peter and claimed him as their inspiration clearly had.

And so we gather from Paul's letter that in Corinth there were fans of Apollos and followers of Peter; or if you like liberals and conservatives. If there is nothing else you get from the sermon this morning, let it be this: the Christian church has always had its tensions.

Our version of this tension in the Church of England has focused this week on the announcement that after six years of conversations and reflection on the question of sexuality, as part of the *Living in Love and Faith* process, our bishops have been unable to agree on extending the definition of marriage to include same-sex relationships. Since many of us may not have had the time to go beyond the headlines, I thought I'd take the time in this sermon to summarise what the bishops have said and to offer a reflection (forgive me for taking little longer over this than a normal sermon). The bishops this week have spoken of three things:

Firstly, they have published a draft of proposed prayers of thanksgiving, dedication and blessing for same-sex couples after a civil marriage or a civil partnership.

Here, for example, are the words of a suggested prayer of promise for what they term 'the sealing of a covenanted friendship'; they are to be said by each person to the other:

N, I offer myself to you in love and friendship; may these words be a seal of my trust and delight in you. Where you go, I shall go: I will seek to share your burdens and your joys. I will pray that you will know God's delight and walk with you wherever God calls us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. All Amen.

And here is a prayer of blessing for rings; the couple are to extend their hands with the rings already in place and the priest is to say:

Almighty God, whose love is revealed in Jesus Christ and poured out in the Holy Spirit: by your blessing, may these rings worn by your servants N and N be signs of their hope-filled covenant and of your everlasting love, in our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. All Amen.

Secondly, alongside the proposed prayers, the Bishops have issued an apology to LGBTQI+ people, which I'll quote in full:

"We want to apologise for the ways in which the Church of England has treated LGBTQI+ people – both those who worship in our churches and those who do not. For the times we have rejected or excluded you, and those you love, we are deeply sorry. The occasions on which you have received a hostile and homophobic response in our churches are shameful and for this we repent.

*As we have listened, we have been told time and time again how we have failed LGBTQI+ people. We have not loved you as God loves you, and that is profoundly wrong. We affirm, publicly and unequivocally, that LGBTQI+ people are welcome and valued: we are all children of God."

And thirdly, the bishops have recommended that the 1991 *Issues in Human Sexuality* report which prohibited clergy (but not laity) from entering same-sex relationships unless they abstain from sex, should be rescinded and replaced with new pastoral guidance. *Issues in Human Sexuality* was a document that all clergy had to give assent to. In some cases, it was the cause of gay clergy being disciplined, removed from their posts, or denied access to jobs. And in many other cases it was simply ignored or turned a blind eye to.

Next month in London the Church's General Synod will receive the bishops' three recommendations and consider its response. If it chooses to accept them, a super majority of two-thirds will be needed.

As in first century Corinth, our church is full of different opinions (many of which, as you'd imagine, have been expressed on Twitter).

There may be a few in the church for whom the bishops' proposals are a step too far. In deference to traditionalists in the wider Anglican Communion (and it is poignant that the announcement falls in the middle of the week of prayer for Christian Unity), Justin Welby, the archbishop of Canterbury, has announced that he will not use them.

Then there will be many conservative, traditionalist and evangelical Christians both here and abroad who will express relief that the use of the prayers are hedged around with conscience clauses, so no clergy person will be forced to use them, and that the bishops explicitly state that they are not the equivalent of a heterosexual marriage service and that the definition of marriage is not being redefined.

There will be others who will be genuinely excited by the direction of travel. The by-line of the official Church of England press release captures this (I quote): 'For the first time, under historic plans outlined today, same-sex couples will be able to come to church to give thanks for their civil marriage or civil partnership and receive God's blessing.' Some therefore will see this as a move in the right direction. The bishops recommend that a period of five years is given to monitor the reception and use of the prayers, and that gives a hint of the shape of the timescale of the possible next stage of the journey.

Then there will be a small number of campaigners who are critical of the patriarchal heritage of marriage, and they may be pleased that the church has not simply tried to force gay partnerships into the model of heterosexual ones. Among them, they may also be a few who have longed for the church to recognise the spiritual quality of non-sexual partnerships or life-long friendships and they may seek to use the liturgies this way.

And finally, there will be a larger number of people (both within and without the church) who will be both disappointed and angry; who may see this as the equivalent of the church scattering a few crumbs under the table; that the prayers themselves feel a second-class offering, which cannot even bring themselves to use the expressions 'same-sex couple' or 'gay partner', but instead use the language of 'covenanted friendships'.

I wonder if you might find yourself somewhere on that spectrum?

The bishops themselves have been candid that this is a compromise and that it reflects their own disagreement. For the first time they have publicly acknowledged their own diversity; again, I quote from their pastoral letter “*We are partnered, single, celibate, married, divorced, widowed, bereaved; heterosexual, gay, bisexual and same-sex attracted. We have diverse convictions about sexuality and marriage.*” Whatever else one might think of what they have said, that form of honesty is (I think) a good thing.

In the face of the divisions at Corinth, Paul himself (like our bishops) struggled to find a way to include everyone. Different factions were aligning themselves with different favourite leaders on the basis on who had baptised them. Paul tried to rise above this, ‘I thank God I baptized none of you’ he began, before remembering that actually he *had* baptised some people – he did have his own set of personal followers. There was therefore no neutral position; it was all a bit messy. So, in the end he pivoted to Christ and the gospel, to try to get his divided community to focus there; and I’d like to conclude this sermon with my own reflection (and I recognise it might not be shared by all).

‘The people that sat in darkness have seen a great light,’ says our Gospel, quoting the prophet Isaiah; into this darkness Jesus walks and calls his disciples to follow.

Amidst our messy struggles, this set of metaphors strikes me as appropriate to dwell on – for to take seriously the idea of Christian faith as walking is to accept we have not yet arrived; when the early Christians called themselves followers of ‘the Way’ and reapplied the stories of the calling of the disciples to themselves - they were acknowledging the fact that the embrace of faith was the start of a journey of transformation, not its completion.

And to say that this walk begins in darkness is to accept that it will include painful falls and embarrassing moments of stumbling. After Peter and the other disciples were called to follow Jesus, we hear again and again, about how they got it wrong.

Tens of thousands of years ago our ancestors began a journey; they began to reflect on the astonishing and often dangerous miracle of birth. They began to surround sexual reproduction (and other strange natural phenomena, like the cycles of the seasons) with religious meaning, with rules and rituals to try to guarantee the protection of the vulnerable baby and mother. This happened in many cultures. In the Hebrew tradition, reproduction came to be considered so important, that any form of contraception or non-reproductive sex was considered taboo (including sex with people of the same sex) and if a husband died leaving no children, his brother was required to have children by his widow. Amidst this celebration of fertility there was no rule against polygamy.

As most cultures were agrarian and focused on the value of brute force, they were patriarchal. In the Jewish tradition (and in many others), this meant that women were

considered the property of their husbands (in fact, the word for husband in Hebrew is simply 'lord'). The last of the ten commandments tells Jewish men not to covet the property of other man, and it includes alongside his neighbour's ox, his donkey and his house, his wife, too.

Fortunately, the journey of finding meaning in marriage did not stop there, for as Israelite society shifted away from brute survival, other values began to emerge: above all companionship and love. Prophets like Hosea and Amos began to see the relationship between two lovers as symbolic of God's relationship with Israel, and so began a shift away from polygamy towards monogamy; the image or reflection of God could be seen in the love of a single man and woman and thus was born the story of Adam and Eve.

But there were hints too that relationships focused on child-bearing might not be the only way of showing love – stories of Naomi and Ruth, David and Jonathan, were preserved and valued alongside the more obvious holy relationships of Abraham and Sarah.

By the time of the NT the journey of finding meaning in marriage led the early Christians to reapply the metaphor of marriage to Jesus's relationship with the church, and this in turn had a feedback effect: it made them think about how husbands and wives should treat one another – and so the idea of loving mutual self-sacrifice slowly began to grow in importance; self-giving love began to take precedence over mere reproduction (even to the extent where the church accepted that some people, monks and nuns, might show their committed self-giving love by deciding *not* to marry just one person, but instead to vow to commit to a community). This too, could be holy love.

The most recent stages of the journey of marriage in the last century in our tradition have included the acceptance of women owning property independently of their husbands; the ideal of equality between the partners and the importance of consent in sex; the acceptance of contraception, within limits of abortion, and IVF; and the acceptance of divorce and remarriage. Today our service books no longer emphasize fertility as the supreme aim of marriage and they recognise that the path to commitment might have been a complex one.

Marriage, like faith, has then been on a journey: a journey out of darkness and (we trust) into the light; that has seen marriage slowly becoming more Jesus-shaped, more Christ-like, more spiritual. A universal human institution has been Christianised; the kingdom of God has entered into it and changed it (like yeast in the dough). For some, that journey has reached its destination and has no further to go; for others (among whom I count myself), it has not: the full dawn of day has not yet broken forth, and the call to continue walking towards the light remains, even whilst we still stumble and sadly continue to hurt one another in the darkness.