

Eight Sunday after Trinity – 7th August 2022

‘Don’t worry, little flock, it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.’ Today I would like to talk about the kingdom of God. I would like to, but I can’t. ‘Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God on earth – and our response was to build the church,’ and today I have to talk about that institution, the church.

At the Lambeth Palace Conference this week, a gathering of Anglican bishops from all over the world claims to speak in the name of the Anglican church, that is, in our name, on God’s attitude to sexuality and gender. All over the world, Anglicans who love God and the church are hurt and angry at what has been said at that conference about sexuality and gender. So it’s something I need to talk about.

The Lambeth Conference brings together Anglican bishops from all over the world who have different backgrounds and contexts. Many have a fundamentalist, conservative approach to their reading of the Bible and understanding of the love of God.

Because of the wide variety of views, the Conference has been ten years in the planning and in an effort to prevent a split in the Communion concessions have been made. The spouses of bishops are invited to the conference, but not the spouses of gay, partnered bishops. But in spite of concessions, immediately before the conference began a group of Conservative bishops dropped a bombshell. They announced they would not receive Communion in any service at which a bishop in a same sex relationship was present. They also proposed that the conference reaffirm resolution 1.10 from the 1998 Conference.

Resolution 1.10 was agreed in 1998 at a time when customs and attitudes were very different. At its heart are three statements:

- firstly, that sex outside marriage is wrong,
- secondly that for a Christian celibacy is the only alternative to marriage,
- and thirdly that homosexual practice is incompatible with Scripture and so the church does not bless same sex marriages.

The first two statements are uncontroversial. They affirm the sacramental nature of sexual intimacy which mirrors the love of God for the church. But if you can only have sex within marriage and the church refuses to recognise your marriage then all gay Christians are condemned to involuntary lifelong celibacy.

That is what the conference was asked to reaffirm and although there was not a vote, Archbishop Justin made it clear in his introductory speech that he personally affirms resolution 1.10. Gay Christians are hurt and furious and so am I. For two years we have gone through the Living in Love and Faith process only for that work to be flung aside – based on what?

Today’s Old Testament reading is apposite because it demonstrates the dangers of reading our own prejudices into the Bible. Isaiah hears God railing against Sodom and Gomorrah for their, ‘Great Sin.’ What is that sin? Well, perhaps not what you might think. It was a failure of hospitality to strangers. If you are a traveller, carrying your tent from place to place as the early settlers of the Middle East were, you are

reliant on the hospitality of strangers, as they may be on you someday. So the duty of hospitality is, to this day, engrained in Middle Eastern cultures.

This is the cultural context of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah: Two strangers arrived in the town of Sodom and were put up for the night by Abraham's nephew, Lot. But the people of Sodom were suspicious that the strangers were spies and threatened to rape them. Male rape was, and still is, used in war as an act of aggression. As a surgeon years ago I was sometimes involved in the surgical reconstruction of victims of male rape referred from the Middle East.

The Old Testament rationale was that if they were spies they would be so degraded and shamed that they would not be able to return to their home city. And so the frightened and furious crowd broke the laws of hospitality. That was their great sin. This is confirmed by Ezekiel who refers to 'The sin of Sodom' for which the city was destroyed (Ezekiel 16.49) and it is clear that the sin was a failure of hospitality. Context matters.

In the Gospel we hear Christ's call to hospitality and generosity. Jesus of Nazareth doesn't seem to have been interested in sexuality or gender. He seldom speaks of it. But he is passionate about the value of generosity and authenticity. 'Sell your possession and give alms', he pleads in today's Gospel. In his teaching he calls for generosity and hospitality and the fullness of life lived with others. He forbids us to judge one another but calls us to repent of our own sins.

So it is not in a spirit of judgement but in solidarity with the brave, partnered, gay bishops of the Anglican church and our LGBTQI+ sisters and brothers that I call on us to affirm:

- 1) It was a failure of the Christian duty of hospitality to refuse to invite the partners of bishop in civil partnerships to the Lambeth conference.
- 2) It is a failure of generosity for a group of bishops to refuse to take Communion at services at which Bishops in civil partnerships receives Communion.
- 3) The Archbishop of Canterbury does not speak in our name when he affirms article 1.10 which states that gay sex within a committed monogamous relationship is a sin although nowhere in the Bible is that explicitly and unambiguously stated.

May I remind you of those words of Jesus: 'Fear not, little flock, it is the Father's pleasure to give you the kingdom.' Christ doesn't call us to Communion only with the virtuous. If he did, how many of us could honestly kneel at the Communion rail? Although we fail to sell our possessions and give alms we are still called, all of us, to kneel together as redeemed sinners. The Eucharist is not a reward for virtue but food for the journey for all of us.