

Sermon

Sunday 10th May, 2009

Lessons

Exodus 19: 1 – 6

1 John 4: 7 – 21

St John 14: 1 – 14

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

**Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in Him
and he in God. And we have known and believed the love that God has for us.
God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.**

1 John 4: 15-16

It has been said:

Whenever we are presented with a choice
between being biblical and being inclusive,
it is a false dichotomy –
for to be truly biblical is to be inclusive
in any community which wants to follow and imitate
Jesus.

Giles Goddard is Rector at St Peter's Church, Walworth in South London. In
his book, *Space for Grace*, he writes:

An Anglican parish church, in a city suburb. Sunday morning,
before the main service at 10.30. Somebody is preparing the
service sheets. Somebody else is setting up the altar. A couple
people are organising Junior Church, and two other people are
deep in discussion about the coffee rota. The clergy are
wandering around getting under people's feet, and the organist
arrives, late, and breathlessly looks for the hymn tunes in the old
book because the new one has gone missing. Someone wanders
in off the street wanting to know if we're Anglican or Catholic, and
a long-standing family (grandmother, 93, mother, 61, daughter, 33,
granddaughter, 11) make their stately way up the church steps
bidding a gracious good morning to all they meet.

In that small cast of characters we have: four Sierra Leoneans; one
Nigerian woman (bisexual); two gay men; two white working-class
women (one clergy, one lay); one white working-class man (clergy,

straight); one woman with long-term mental health problems; one man (divorced) recently married to his [partner (divorced)] and looking after his mother who has Alzheimer's; one young middle class woman who is avowedly atheist but celebrates the church community; and two Nigerian matriarchs who see themselves as responsible for the smooth running of the church, come what may.

Goddard states:

As the congregation starts to arrive, so the diversity grows. Age, wealth, social status, employment, sexual orientation, ability; all are thrown into the melting pot, and in the chatter and the praying, the singing and the hearing, the ingredients begin to meld. The disparate become one, and the individuals become a community. Briefly, in the moment after the Eucharist, there is a silence. And, perhaps, in that silence, broken maybe by a baby crying or by the sneeze of an old lady with a cold, the community acknowledges itself as a communion, and has a sense of itself as something beyond itself, as a reflection (however muddied, however pale) of the kingdom of God we are called to celebrate.

By the end [of the service] the sense of unity is going; by coffee time it's almost gone. But there's a memory, still, of the sense of the glory of the presence of the Lord that will linger and grow week by week. So, gradually, the community builds; we *are* the body of Christ, and we *are becoming* the body of Christ.

Jesus said, 'In My Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you.' Heaven, My Father's house, is a place of many mansions. Jesus uses an image, a metaphor, which reveals space, comfort and generosity. His words, this metaphor, was first delivered to Jews and then, through, St Paul, was carried to the Gentiles. 'If it were not so, I would have told you.' Another Giles, Giles Fraser, said:

Inclusivity has nothing to do with being liberal, it's not a churchy version of political correctness. It's a gospel imperative, fundamental to the nature of God and at the very heart of the mission and ministry

of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In thirteen days time, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland will have to take one of the most difficult decisions it has ever had to face since first it convened in December 1560. Some have said that the national church is on the verge of a second Disruption. The Disruption was in 1843: 450 ministers left the church, their pulpits and their manses, on the principle of a congregation's right to call its minister. Led by Thomas Chalmers, the ministers and elders walked out of the General Assembly. The new church, named the Free Church of Scotland, rejected the imposition of a minister on a congregation by a patron. It was a fracture from which the church has never fully recovered. The split led to a dramatic increase in the number of church buildings in cities, towns and villages. Out of religious zeal, if not shallow pride, the new congregations, in many cases, built churches as large or larger than the parish church. Following the union in 1929, the Church of Scotland had too many buildings, most of which have seldom, if ever, been full. Now, in 2009, an Aberdeen congregation wishes to exercise that historic right: to call a minister of their own choice. They have called the Revd Scott Rennie. Scott is gay and lives with his partner. Once inducted into the charge, he intends to live with his partner in the manse. Following objections, the General Assembly must now decide whether or not to allow this call to proceed. Many ministers from across Edinburgh, Scotland and the world have added their voices to those of the objectors. It is not an exaggeration to say that many in Scottish society

and the World Church are waiting to hear the decision of the General Assembly.

It is my guess that the decision will be on the national news that night.

I began with a quote from Richard Burridge:

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between being biblical and being inclusive,
it is a false dichotomy –
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Jesus.

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One minister, a member of the evangelical group, *Forward Together*, has said,

‘The Church calls.....everyone to join us, and become a Christian under the

lordship of Jesus Christ, and accept his word and his rule.’ I live under the

Lordship of Jesus Christ. I accept His Word and rule, but I disagree with the

biblical interpretation offered by *Forward Together*. There is a certain irony

about the Protestant churches. They hold the Bible as the supreme rule of faith

and life, the only problem being that they cannot agree on how to interpret it.

The very fact that there are at least five Presbyterian denominations in Scotland,

not to mention the rest of the world, is testimony to that fact. Biblical

interpretation is hugely subjective: the most dangerous Christians are those

who believe that it is not.

Jesus said, ‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father

except by me.’ In the hands of fundamentalist and narrowly evangelical

Christians that verse justifies Christian exclusivity. We are told that unless one believes that Jesus died for our sins, paid the price for our sins with his life, by dying satisfied a wrathful god – in other words, substitutionary atonement – we will not be saved. There is nothing of that theology in John’s Gospel. The Gospel is a post-Resurrection writing: the author believes that to be ‘born again’ means that we, as followers of Jesus, are called to undergo personal and political transformation, such that those who are excluded, the peasants, the children, the women and the sick, can take their place as equals in this world as well as in Heaven. In My Father’s House are many mansions and everyone will enjoy space, rest and generosity. I believe that to be biblical is to be inclusive. At the General Assembly, there will be discussion about biblical interpretation and, while all Christians claim the Lordship of Jesus Christ in their life, there will be no agreement on this issue.

Article 1 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights reads:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2 reads:

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

On the one hand, it seems reasonable to extrapolate from the Declaration that individuals cannot be discriminated against on grounds of sexual orientation and personal lifestyle. On the other hand, can an organisation exclude homosexual people from leadership roles on religious grounds as an expression of human rights? This legal question has some way to go before we have a definitive answer. Giles Goddard states:

There is, now, broad consensus among scientists, philosophers, policy-makers, legal establishments and society that orientation towards people of the same gender is and has always been an intrinsic part of any society, whether in the west, the east, modern times or prehistory.

The legal question, in my view, is not as important as the biblical imperative.

The First Letter of John states: *God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.* How can the Church manifest *love*, Christian love, towards all people, the heterosexual majority and homosexual minority? In 1988, twenty-one years ago, the Jamaican-born Liverpool footballer, John Barnes, had bananas thrown at him during the derby match at Goodison Park against Everton. From the terraces, there were shouts of ‘Monkey’. It is repulsive, shaming and painfully offensive to think about this story now. One can no more change one’s sexual orientation than one can change the colour of one’s skin!

If the Church says that a person who is gay cannot be a minister of the gospel, then we send a message, loud and clear, to society that gay people are second

class; gay people are not quite as good as heterosexual people. Heterosexual people are, in some sense, superior. A large number of gay men by the age of twenty are broken people. They are broken because they have had to wrestle alone and silently with their homosexual feelings in a heterosexual world. They have felt fear and the prospect of letting their parents down. They have learned at a formative age what it means to be an outsider; they have felt that pain of isolation. In many cases that fear was well-founded. Children look for and need approval from their parents. When they do not receive it, the pain runs very deep. Many of those who attended church have felt the disapproval of their minister. They have been told that, in God's eyes, they are unclean. Has the Church ever listened to the pain of gay people, fellow human beings, who speak of their craving for acceptance, love and intimacy instead of the usual contempt and rejection? When a national institution, like the Church, publicly states that homosexual people are not good enough to become ministers of Word and Sacrament, in some way deficient and not good enough to take on that leadership role, the Church is, by practical implication, sanctioning prejudice and abuse against gay people. Paradoxically, the institution founded on love and for love becomes oppressive and abusive.

At this year's General Assembly, the national church has the opportunity to say to Scottish society that homosexual people are of equal value to heterosexual people, that in God's eyes gay people are loved by God no more and no less

than heterosexual people and, because of that, in this church, gay people will enjoy the same respect, rights and privileges as heterosexual people. If Scott Rennie has the necessary gifting, skills, education and calling required of a minister by a congregation, then the General Assembly needs to publicly affirm his ministry. If we do not, then we are the ones throwing bananas onto the pitch. If we do not, we will be saying, 'It is OK to put these people down'? 'It is OK to deny these people respect because we do.' Jesus taught us to pray, 'Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' What do we imagine Heaven to be like? Will gay people be in the basement or will we all sit at the same Table? Will only heterosexual people be allowed to serve? In God's Heaven, justice reigns. In God's Heaven, the last shall be first: there's a scary message for the conservative evangelicals!

Amen.