

Sunday 9 June 2024
The Second Sunday After Trinity

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Genesis 3.8-15

NT: II Corinthians 4.13-5.1

Gp: Mark 3.20-35

Earlier this week, the Chief Constable of Merseyside made a statement in response to the 'Apologise Now' campaign led by Peter Tatchell, which invited police forces across the UK to apologise for previous treatment of the LGBTQ+ community. I immediately thought of that great Liverpool star Paul O'Grady who was performing as Lily Savage in a London pub in 1987. He later recalled, "When I came out on the stage, the place was heaving [with police] and they were all wearing rubber gloves. And of course I said, 'oh good, have you come to do the washing up?'" It's a funny story, but a reminder of a toxic culture towards the LGBTQ+ community. On Wednesday the Chief Constable said, "I wanted to apologise on behalf of Merseyside Police, for our historic mistreatment of our LGBTQ+ communities and our homophobic application of the legislation in place at the time, which was wrongly used to proactively target members of the LGBTQ+ community, in particular gay and bi-sexual men. This ruined lives as it had a lasting negative impact on those who were targeted."

When I announced my departure in March, I knew that it would hit the headlines, although I probably wasn't expecting quite so many headlines. I have not spoken in church since then about that statement, and it is not the focus of today's sermon, but I did want to say a couple of further things in the light of Chief Constable's statement. Firstly, that the Church of England has yet to make a meaningful apology of the stature of the Chief Constable's statement – and Merseyside Police is the eighteenth police force to make such a statement. And secondly that the on-going discrimination in the church against sections of our society challenges our claim to be a national church which is for everyone. In particular, the Church of England survives with exemptions from, amongst others, two key Acts of Parliament: the Equalities Act 2010, and the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013. We cannot claim to be a national church for all people if we rely on exemptions from acts of parliament so that we can treat some people differently.

I talk about this today not just because of its relevance to contemporary events, but also because of the Gospel passage which we have just heard. After removing all the bits about Satan, it can be summed up

in these two lines: “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.” This all sounds very sensible, but in fact it is more problematic, because without division it is difficult to make progress. And remember, as well, another quotation from the Bible, when Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10.34). So, the biblical testimony is a little confused on this. In fact there seem to me to be distinct dangers of a kingdom which is not divided against itself, because there is nothing against which to test the shared opinions. The Chief Constable was apologising last week for a period in the history of the police – and indeed much of the nation – when there wasn’t challenge to views which were commonly held, and which we would now reject.

How do we discern the right path? This is an issue for the middle of a General Election campaign, but it also raises the question of whether right decisions are an absolute or whether they are contextual. One of the failings of religious extremists is that they see the world in absolutes. In fact this isn’t that wide of the mark, in that if we believe in Jesus as God incarnate then we have to see something absolute in him. God does not change: he offers love to his creation without being moved to offer love because he cannot be changed or influenced by us. Jesus himself was a deeply contextual person, and this tension between the two natures of Christ is evident throughout the Gospels. More importantly for us, if we are looking for absolutes in God then the challenge is how we would perceive them correctly. For everyone who claims an absolute law in religion there is someone who would claim the opposite. The arrogance of religious extremism is believing that they always have the right answer.

For someone such as I who believes in the practicality of ethical relativism it can look as if I am denying the absolute nature of God, but of course this is not so. Firstly, I question only the absolutism of claiming single interpretations; secondly, I question whether it is actions or intentions which are ethical. I don’t offer you an answer to those questions, but I do wonder whether any action can be rated out of ten on a scale of morality, or whether it is the motivation which should be placed on a scale.

In our second reading from II Corinthians, St Paul writes, “Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.” He draws a distinction between who we are and our physicality in the world. This is exactly the same as differentiating between thought and deed: they

cannot be held apart, but one is consequential upon the other.

So we return to our Gospel reading and my proposition that division is in fact a positive state of affairs if it challenges and tests assumptions. The sequence of events which led to the Chief Constable's apology included people speaking out against perceived orthodoxies and very often people finding a voice to challenge where no one else will do so. I hope that this is what my statement in March did within the Church. I was not the first person to speak out, and nor shall I be the last, but if we do not cause division then we cannot have progress and, as the Chief Constable acknowledged, without the progress there was on-going discrimination against individuals in society.

But where there is division we also need to find healing and reconciliation. After stirring the pot, we need to let it settle again. We cannot live in conflict, but it is sometimes necessary. And this is again the difference between intention and action. In a week when we have also seen the 80th anniversary of the D Day landings, the nation has reflected on conflict and outcomes. Probably most people – though not all – accept that the Second World War was a conflict which was both necessary and justified because the defeat of Nazism was an outcome for which it was worth fighting. Sometimes we have to fight for what we believe in. Fortunately today very few of us have to undergo the intensity of the conflict 80 years ago, but that is not the case in some parts of the world.

Causing division and upsetting the view of the majority can be the only way to progress, but the intention should always be towards a unity which benefits all people. Whether it is campaigning for inclusion within society, or whether it is overcoming an aggressor, we have been given agency to act. Jesus rarely spoke in absolutes, but he met people where they were. We can only include people when we really see them.

Fr Crispin Pailing