

**Sunday 23 June 2024**  
**The Fourth Sunday After Trinity**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Job 38.1-11**  
**NT: 2 Corinthians 6.1-13**  
**Gp: Mark 4.35-41**

Over the centuries, there have been many huge debates that have split the church: Protestants versus Catholics; the divide between the East and the West; the controversies over Jesus and the Trinity. All involved profound theological and cultural tensions.

Recently I learned of a similar debate that rocked Liverpool Parish Church. It was nearly ten years ago, when a relatively young and fresh-faced Rector was still making his mark. And the debate? Whether or not to install automatic doors in the church entrance. There were a lot of questions: expense; practicality; would the leaves get blown in? Strong views were expressed on either side. But eventually agreement was reached.

Nowadays, much like the creed, we take the doors for granted. They are a fixture. If you come here regularly, you probably hardly notice them; though I do recommend that next time you use them you pause for a moment to appreciate how easy they make it to enter the church.

It's tempting to make these doors into a metaphor for the church's openness and welcome. And it is certainly true that our Rector leaves the parish church more than ever committed to a robust inclusivity. A door that opens automatically speaks of a grace offered freely. All are welcome here; just as importantly, all can actually get in.

That's fine, but it risks being a bit glib. The opening doors do not tell the story of the work and debate which led to them.

Fortunately, debates in this church are conducted with civility - for the most part! We generally don't fight, anathematise or burn our heretics at the stake. It's not like some early church controversies when bands of partisan monks were sent out to beat up their opponents (allegedly).

It is still true that any significant decision, change or advance requires us to face tensions and conflicts. That is being pressed home on us right now because we are in the middle of an election campaign. Parties and candidates make their pitch to the electorate. There are claims and counter-claims. There is undoubtedly a lot of spin, but there is also fact-checking and ways of holding our would-be MPs to account.

It is far from a perfect system, but a working democracy depends upon it. When there are no arguments and no challenges, our freedom and our common life is diminished.

This is true of politics. We seem to have a harder time admitting it is also true of religion. There is an inbuilt assumption that religious truths should be timeless. We tend to think they come down from God, they are part of an unchanging tradition or they are found in an infallible scripture.

However, we only have to look with open eyes and the tools of modern scholarship to know that this is not the case. Religious truth claims has a history. The creeds we say were the result of all those wars of words (and sometimes worse) that were a constant feature of early church history. The idea that the church serenely sailed through the calm waters of orthodoxy is a myth.

That's not to debunk the creeds or the truth claims the church has made. It *is* to say we need to get real about the humanity of our church; that we do not have the truth, or God, neatly tied up in our definitions.

The Bible is a good example. Many treat it simply as a finished product, a book safely bound between two covers, a set of timeless truths and rules. But it is not. It is a huge collection of texts of many kinds, from many periods, put together over centuries. Often, even single books have been stitched together from various sources. They don't all say the same thing. They are many voices, many interpretations. And we, if we are reading the Bible responsibly, also have to interpret it. We bring our questions and our context into the equation. Everyone does: and the people who claim to read the Bible literally and believe everything it says are the worst ones, because they won't admit that they are doing it. They are as selective as the most infamous theological liberal. They just pretend they are not.

We forget the difficult path, the struggle that led to the end product. That's a serious problem - especially so when it comes to the beliefs or scriptures we claim as orthodox and timeless.

It matters that we remember the very human process behind these things. It matters because we need to be accountable for the beliefs we hold and how they affect others.

Some might say this means we're breaking away from the faith or the Bible. Not at all. All of this is right there within our history and our scriptures. Take this church. One of the great things Crispin has done is research its history and show how this wonderful church, every brick of it, is bound up with the evils of the slave trade. The evidence is there. Does that mean we write this church off? No. It means we can be this church responsibly, honestly – and give even greater meaning to our inclusivity today. What we can't do is forget that history or pretend it never happened.

Or take our gospel reading for today. This is the famous episode of the stilling of the storm. One question you might have about this passage is: did it actually happen? Those who claim everything in the Bible is literally true might say yes. Those who apply a sceptical lens might offer another explanation. Neither of them can reach beyond the story we have to show what really happened that day.

So, we have the story, and it is clearly not just a report of a historical event. It is theological, a story with a message. For the early believers, it said: Jesus is with you in the storm, whether that storm is divisions in the church or persecution from the authorities. This Jesus, the story says, is not just a teacher, but one who brings a divine power of creation and salvation into our midst.

I suggest this story is therefore best read as a parable about Jesus, one that speaks to the church in trouble. And like many gospel stories, it almost goes out of its way to show the disciples' lack of faith and understanding. It bears the marks of the weakness, division, ambition, faithlessness, egoism and plain stupidity that the disciples and the church can show. Of course! We are only human.

You know those maths questions, when you can't just give the answer, but have to 'show your working'? The Bible does this often: it shows its working. It shows the messy, divided process that our response to God can be.

And none of this is bad news. It suggests that we find God *in* that messy process. The Word is made flesh. God finds us in the world, in our humanity. We do not get handed truth on a platter to dole out to others. We do not have to turn our back on history, science or common sense. We find the truth through trial and error, thinking things through, listening to voices and experiences very different from our own. We do it through engaging with the world. Because that's where we exercise our faithfulness to God. And that is where God meets us.

I'm grateful to our Rector for modelling this. Crispin has done far more here than improve the building. He has taken the calling of this church, to be a church for the city, and he has extended and deepened it. He has engaged with the world: with issues of homelessness, education, food justice, with the life of our great city, with armed forces, the legal profession, seafarers and with many, many others. I know from my own experience that his proactive welcome makes such a difference. Seeing how many people are here, from so many organizations and as individuals, we can get a sense of the lives his ministry has touched and how it has changed our city for the better.

And he has been honest. Sometimes that honesty has been difficult to hear. When he announced he was stepping down, it was with a statement that condemned the ongoing homophobia, misogyny and abuse that is too prevalent in the wider church. But it is only through honesty and challenge that we can reach for a deeper inclusion. And because of who he is, Crispin leaves us empowered. His style of leadership has been called 'inimitable' – but it has not been one of top-down commands. It's true, perhaps he has enjoyed the limelight every now and again – it is not every Rector who gets a spread in the pages of *Hello* magazine, out-dressing Princess Anne – but the commitment and confidence he has brought to his role have overflowed into our church life. That's the gift he leaves us with.

Think about how, this evening, our church hosts a vigil and dialogue with Bishop John, calling on the church to bless same sex marriage. We're grateful to Bishop John for being here today, but also for the openness and leadership he continues to show. I've no doubt that, as a church, we will continue to support him in that, and continue to play our part publicly in the struggle for a more just and inclusive church.

St Paul, for all his faults, knew something about the struggle for inclusion. In our second reading, he asks his readers 'not to accept the grace of God in vain'. He writes about all the suffering, hardship and conflict he endured. His opponents and life itself had thrown

everything at him. But at the end of it, he writes 'We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you.'

Honesty about our faith and history. Responsibility for our beliefs. A heart wide open to God and to others. These are the marks of the church that Crispin leaves today. We are not perfect, and we will mess things up from time to time, but the compass is set. We are not likely to let go our calling to welcome and bless every child of God.

I began by talking about the doors of the church. Those doors allow people to look in and see what is here, and perhaps to feel drawn to it. They also allow us to go out into the world and follow our calling wherever truth and love matter.

The welcome you find through those doors is hard won. Openness, inclusivity, justice are hard won. Today, they are under threat. They need us to stand up for them, with grace and compassion. In the storm it is easy to lose faith, or grasp at simplistic solutions. We must steer clear of those options. We must keep the doors - and our hearts - open.

**Fr Steven Shakespeare**