

SERMON FOR ADVENT 3 | 11.12.2022

Isaiah 35: 1-10; James 5: 7-10; St Matthew 11: 2-11

In two days time, on Tuesday, our most recent cleaner Olena Nehneka and her daughter Alana will be returning to Ukraine for a short Christmas break with their families – husband, dad, parents, grandparents. It is a long journey: a two hour flight to Poland and then over twelve hours on a bus to a small town 100 miles from Lviv. Standing in Church with Olena on Friday morning you could see the tension, the pent-up anxiety of these last seven months. She has put so much store by this visit and yet – she knows that things will never be anything like the same as when she left in the summer. And yet her strength and determination to make the best of it was electric.

So often John the Baptist is portrayed as a brooding figure in the wilderness calling people to face the error of their ways. But there is a very different side of him too – the reason why our Advent candle today is pink. John stands for light in the darkness: for the gift of hope when things seem so difficult. And they are difficult right now.

Today I promised to try to share with you some thoughts about two issues that we are facing us as Anglican Christians – though these topics are universally present in every Christian denomination as we approach the end of the first quarter of the 21st century. They are: how we respond to the increasingly loud call for marriage to be made available to those in same sex relationships (so called ‘equal marriage’); and how we cope with the fact that - for the first time since the Dark Ages well before the Norman Conquest of 1066 - Christians account for less than half of the civil population. And we do it with the help of today’s Readings.

In a YouGov poll in March, people were asked whether they thought same-sex marriage in the Church of England was inevitable? The result was a 55% vote in favour. And going by the average age of those taking part in such things, I suspect that young people would have hugely increased that figure. Most people, probably closer to three quarters of the population, would say it was inevitable – some more enthusiastic of course than others. Like the marriage of divorcees and the ordination of women, it almost certainly will happen.

And people like Bishop Stephen Croft of Oxford whom I referred to three weeks ago and who has made several public statements on the issue since, want us to embrace that new position with enthusiasm.

Three times, he says, the CofE has debated this topic and then shied away from a firm resolution to change. And the stark fact is that unless we are willing to listen to what society is saying, we will simply disappear into a sea of irrelevance. No one will listen to anything else we say because we have failed to respond 'to the need of the moment'. We cannot talk meaningfully about our bias for the poor or immigration or the challenges of global warming if the key issue of our day, equal marriage, is constantly being kicked into the long grass. Like it or not, our role as a missionary body is dependent on getting this right. Moreover, says Steven, when talking to same sex couples who have been together as long as me, I cannot see any difference in the commitment to love and mutual support which is what marriage is about.

But that isn't quite true, says Angela Tilby, a women priest and religious commentator. Any Church Marriage Preface is quite specific: it talks about marriage as being the coming together of a man and woman – not just for love and mutual support, but for the explicit procreation of children. Leave that out and you redefine what Christian marriage is.

Back comes Bishop Steven: OK, that may be true; but that is what the state has done. In its Town Hall ceremonies, it leaves out procreation as a reason for marriage - and we can do the same, adapting or re-writing the Church Preface to fit what is the accepted norm today. We simply have to face the fact that same-sex couples will no longer be fobbed off with a second-class institution when they see their bonds as every bit as deep and lasting as those traditionally held by men and women.

The sharing of faith in our day is our priority not the propping of the institution of marriage which has already changed its form and manner over the years: if you think about it, romantic marriage is a relatively new concept anyway. If we are to win souls, we should not be afraid of revising our traditions in the light of new understandings. And we certainly shouldn't be blackmailed by societies outside Europe where history and culture have made the physical expression of love within same-sex relationships an absolute taboo.

But many will ask 'So what is the point of Christian principle if it is simply open to change because that is what everybody else thinks'. Do we simply change because the majority believes we should?

Rowan Williams, in a brilliant Reith lecture this week, asks us to dig a little deeper. In a liberal society like the UK, he suggests that the freedom to worship and 'to be religious' tends to be treated as a slightly odd but harmless minority pastime. You can think what you like because, after all, everyone's views are as valid as anyone else's. No, the problem comes when your convictions then take practical expression and he quotes our own Lillian Ladele of this congregation who, as a practicing Christian Registrar, refused to celebrate same sex unions in Islington Town Hall - and was sacked. It wasn't what she thought that was the problem; it was the conscientious moral decision she made as a result. How, her critics demanded, could it be right that a belief in transcendent God could oblige the rest of society to adjust its laws and customs and to bypass normal rules of accountability? Doesn't the state have to legislate according to the overwhelming consensus – what the majority is able to live with?

But, Rowan says, this is where people of faith have such a contribution to make. Instead of just seeking some utilitarian 'yes/no' answer, the believer will find themselves standing back, holding the paradoxes and the opposites as parts of the new solution, gazing into the distance for the time when the edges of the conflicts begin to merge; as Rowan says, *with the freedom to gaze expectantly for that which is hoped for.*

This is the freedom that filled the mind of John the Baptist and the freedom that he wants us to engage in too. And you won't be surprised that Rowan offers a rather Anglican vision for the future, *filled with a sense of hope that reminds us that the way things happen to us today are not set in stone. What we seek is not some kind of consensus which will coerce people and force them to comply but will leave the questions out in the open so that we can apply our imaginations; we look to a time when solutions are not about success, uniformity or popularity in some kind of enforced frozen set of regulations but rather are part of a society where there is endless space for growth and change?*

The second reading from the Letter of James talks about the need for patience. As with slavery, racial justice, gender equality, the rights of children and increasingly our awareness of the natural world, these issues which once seemed impossible to resolve have begun to find a new shape.

Which is why we come together today to celebrate this process of patiently awaiting the unfolding of God's purposes, rarely this OR that and mostly both/and. And in that 'patient waiting' lies the tantalizing vision of dignity for all contained in the wonderful words of Isaiah: *the blind will see and the deaf hear. The lame will dance and those who cannot speak will leap for joy.*

And the fall in numbers in Church? Yes, on the face of it, alarming!

But as I prepared this sermon, one biblical phrase kept coming back to me: *You will reap what you sow...*

And I began to look back at the style and manner of the Church over the last several hundred years. And I think that Rowan Williams is probably right: we have desperately tried to get people to conform to the what we wanted from them. We have tried scaring them with the fear of hell; we have tried making them feel guilty about all kinds of things – and we have allowed ourselves to get distracted from our main role which is to help and encourage people to find their natural relationship with the God of love. And we have often bored them rigid.

After all these years I have very little anxiety in watching the Church of God get smaller and less concerned with its own survival. I certainly don't buy all the 'Going for Growth' stuff which seems to be building on past failures. But by getting smaller I think there is more of a chance of our returning to the much older Celtic model of the Church - being there for people, getting to know and love them and accompanying them on whatever journey they are travelling on.

Actually that was the best bit of Steve Croft's recent article: the bit where he talked about the way he sat down with a gay couple and heard their story – in an utterly non-judgmental way.

I suspect it is very much *what* Jesus would have done in the same circumstances. And that is the source of our hope: when we make Jesus visible *the blind will see and the deaf will hear...*