

Gay Marriage in Church and the General Synod Debate of 15-2-2017

There was widespread media coverage of what happened at the Church of England's General Synod meeting last Wednesday evening, and by now most of us will be all too aware of it.

A document, which was a sort of 'thinking-out loud-paper', which detailed collective mind of the Church of England Bishops on Same Sex Marriage and the Blessing of Same Sex Unions, was thrown out. The Document took a conservative stance, wanting to adhere to the Church's traditional teaching on Marriage. So it seems that on this occasion the more liberal-minded members of General Synod, including a number of well-known activists, prevailed.

Although the conservative stance of the report had already come in for plenty of criticism from some quarters, nobody really expected it to be rejected quite like that: it was never intended to be the 'last word' on the issue, and it was never intended to lead directly to the enactment of any legislation one way or the other. But it was rejected, and the collective authority of the Bishops, not least the Archbishop, has been seriously undermined. In some organisations a shock of this magnitude might have been a 'resigning matter' for the leadership.

Some key dates can help explain what happened.

Back in 1998, a mile from here, the worldwide Anglican Bishops who were gathered for the Lambeth Conference voted to uphold traditional attitudes to sex and marriage in quite an uncompromising statement. At the time this certainly caused great upset to people who wanted to see the Anglican Churches as being more liberal and accommodating towards homosexual people.

The next date is 1999: that is important because, for the first time in history, national opinion polls revealed that more people in the UK were saying that they thought that same sex relationships were OK, rather than something to be outlawed. People's attitudes to gender and sexuality issues had been softening for decades, and 1999 marked a major tipping point.

This means that the Church now found itself on a trajectory which was taking it increasingly out of line with popular opinion when it came to these issues.

In 2010 a small but interesting decision was made at General Synod, as a result of a private member's motion: Civil partners of clergy would be given church pension-rights if their clergy partners predeceased them. In 2010 it came as a shock to some that there were clergy in civil partnerships, but there was absolutely nothing in Law to prevent this. In some instances Civil Partnerships had been contracted out of convenience, for example between a retired vicar and a life-long live-in housekeeper, so as to ensure that the surviving party had future security of property. That 2010 Synod vote did give tacit acknowledgment to same-sex relationships, though.

And then the big one. In 2014, under David Cameron, there was a key change to national legislation when Parliament allowed same-sex or 'equal' marriages. The Church of England, however, was specifically exempt from having to solemnize same-sex marriages, and it does not do them. Furthermore, there is still no authorized form even for the blessing same-sex couples.

Now, as the Church of England is the 'established Church' in our nation, the 2014 legislation was always going to be a problem as the Parliamentary ruling put Church Marriage Law out of kilter with national marriage law. On the one hand it's easily argued that in spite of that the Church's job was, and is to, uphold traditional Christian teaching on Marriage; but on the other hand people could say that the Church of England is a church which is there to serve **everyone** in the country, and that ought to include those in same sex partnerships who want to get legally married in church, just like their heterosexual friends. So from 2014, the position of the Church was at variance with public opinion, and also at variance with marriage legislation.

In 2016, the current membership of General Synod was elected. Those standing had to campaign for their seats, and there are no prizes for guessing what the highest profile campaign-topic was: it was the same-sex marriage issue. At that stage nobody quite knew the collective mind of the General Synod on the issue, but we certainly do now: the House of Bishops have retained a conservative stance and want to uphold traditional teaching on marriage; so do the laity, or at least most of them. The House of Clergy,

by a narrow majority, seem to want a major change in attitude *and* legislation; and they have given a clear 'thumbs down' message to the Bishops.

There are some things we know now that we didn't know before the recent vote:

First, the authority of the Bishops, including and especially the Archbishop, is weaker than we thought;

Secondly, there are many activists amongst the elected clergy in the General Synod, some of whom are unafraid to speak out candidly about their personal lives.

Thirdly, the polarization will be even more evident in 2020, when campaigning begins for the election of a new General Synod assembly - those who will be elected in 2020 will have to consider the matter again, and decisions are going to have to be made;

And finally, what happened on Wednesday does not augur well for those planning a Lambeth Conference for 2020, as Wednesday's vote will have given a clear message to the many very conservative Anglican Bishops and Provinces in the developing world that the Church of England has gone soft on the sexuality issue. To a sub-Saharan bishop, on Wednesday the Church of England, by not holding fast to traditional Biblical standards, became even more peripheral to the heartbeat of the worldwide Anglican Communion than it was already. It has lost its moral authority with regard to large parts of the worldwide Communion.

The Church of England is in a unique position in this country because it is the established Church: how do you maintain traditional teaching on the one hand, and claim to be welcoming and relevant to the whole population, including minorities, on the other? That's the problem.

It was interesting to see that that theme of Creation is reflected in the readings this morning. Discussions in church about gender and marriage often begin with an attempt to discern, from scripture and from the created world, God's intentions for humanity. In fact, in the Gospel tradition when Jesus is quizzed about divorce, he talks about the role and status of

marriage and quotes what is known as the 'Creation Ordinance' from Genesis 1: "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them: male and female he created them", commanding them to "be fruitful and multiply".

It is often argued by Christians that by observing the creation we can gain insights into the mind and intentions of the Creator; and the Gospel passage, which featured today - about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field - is referred to. And you get people who develop theologies on the basis of more comprehensive and thoroughgoing studies of the material world, beginning in the 18th C with Linnaeus and - in today's world - people who are anti-Darwin and subscribe to a theory known as 'Intelligent Design' as a way of holding to a literal understanding of Genesis 1.

Genesis 1 reached its final form in around 500BC and was honed by scribes who were close to the priestly teachers and chieftans who had always been involved with the cult practices at the Jerusalem Temple. The Priestly teachers were involved in many of the Old Testament writings and they had certain fixations which come over again and again. The ritual laws they practiced (many of which are set out in the Old Testament) show a characteristic obsession with 'separations out': things that could and couldn't go together, how people needed to be separated if ritually unclean, and what foods could not be combined and so on.

You get this in the Genesis 1 creation passage: a separation of acts into 7 distinct days, separation of light and darkness, waters and firmament, and a separation of static things from moving things. Days 1-3 are concerned with static things, like land, vegetation and the seas; whilst Days 4-6 involve moving things like the planets, beasts and finally humans. That explains why, oddly, light is created (on Day 1) *before* stars and planets – which move – so they can't come until Day 4.

Observations on the text like that show that it's not so much about what we may (or may not) discern about God through understanding of material phenomena, but it's about some *deeper seated rhythms* and principles by which we can come to know God. Similarly, the birds and lilies passage in the New Testament is less an encouragement to us to appreciate nature, but more about discerning moral meanings which lie *beyond* the veil of nature. This idea that we can sort-of 'read' nature to know directly about

God's plan and purposes is a very recent one in Christian history and one which, in any case, was weakened by Darwin and his fellow scientists who observed 'nature red in tooth and claw'. In other words, it's very hard to say 'things should be like this, because they must reflect the ways of nature'. Observation of nature has a part to play in theology, and in our efforts to understand things about God, but it does not provide the obvious or easy answers that people once thought it did.

This brings us back to the sexuality debate, because few issues we discuss in the Church are more closely linked to insights and issues around the ways of nature. It has to be said that the language of the Marriage Service in the old Book of Common Prayer is candidly clear about that, as indeed is St Paul in 1 Corinthians where, in a lengthy discussion about practices and principles around marriage he says lots about the containment of lust but nothing at all about having children!

With this debate in the Church, one wonders what will happen next. The government legislation of 2014, David Cameron's proud legacy, was a watershed and the Church of England will be put under increasing pressure as a result of it. Activists within the Church will probably press for an authorized blessing service for same sex couples, or just come up with one of their devising which will gain its own currency.

We will be reminded again and again in the media that there are church people who have aspirations about how they want to order their lives which go beyond what we have always seen as normal and traditional.

The thing that really matters for each one of us is being able to say that the ordering of *our own lives*, under God, is something that we really want to develop and discern; and Jesus' teaching in the Gospel reading does remind us that whoever we are, God wants to draw close to us and that we should try to draw closer to him.

This week a lot of people in the Church of England, on both sides of the Debate, including the bishops, are anxious about what's going to happen next, and how things will pan out. Meanwhile, Jesus says, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring troubles of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today!".