

Trinity 6 – division in the church
All Saints, Coddington, 19th July 2009

One of the first problems Paul had in the early church was the division between Jewish and gentile believers. The division crystallised around the issue of circumcision: the Jewish Christians thought the gentiles ought to be circumcised, following the requirements of the law. After all, Jesus was a Jew, the first Christians were Jews and Paul himself was a strict Jew, all brought up to follow the Jewish bible, which we call the Old Testament. But to the gentiles, much of the Old Testament did not make sense and I guess it was not just the male gentiles who saw no point at all in circumcision. Actually, there was much in the Old Testament which did not make sense to the gentiles and much which was in fact not followed by the Jews themselves, but as these issues tend to do, it focussed on this one issue – should the gentile believers be circumcised?

Now I can't help but see an analogy with our situation in the church today. In 2003, the Episcopal church in the USA consecrated an openly gay man, Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire. Since then there has been a moratorium on such consecrations, which now seems likely to be broken as a result of a vote passed in the American synod to approve further ordinations. At the heart of this disagreement is the issue of homosexuality – is it a sin or not? But while this goes much deeper than the issue of circumcision, which must surely have been recognised as a ceremonial issue, at heart there is something deeper, namely, the question of authority. Who or what has the right to say homosexuality is sinful?

Traditionally, people have looked for authority either in the bible, the church or in the use of reason, but each of these has its problems. As Christians, we accept the New Testament as authoritative and in some senses as over-riding the old. It is not a case of throwing away the Old Testament, but certainly the teaching of Jesus builds on it and extends it in ways which were new and which challenge us today. So, if you accept the New Testament you also accept the idea of change. And it is surely pretty limiting to think that change only happened once. The gospel is much more than we can comprehend and we discover more as years go by.

The process of discovery is in the interpretation of the text for which people look to the church. It is interpretation which enables us to reject much of Deuteronomy, like this bit I found at random (Deuteronomy 21.18-21): ‘When a man has a son who is disobedient and out of control . . .the parents shall bring him to the elders of the town and say to them, “this son of ours is disobedient and out of control; he will not obey us, he is a wastrel and a drunkard.” Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death.’ It doesn't exactly follow our ideas of justice does it? Of course we understand that this was written long ago, for a very primitive society. The bible needs interpretation and that interpretation needs to take place in the light of the changes that have happened over the centuries and the very different society in which we now live.

Interpretation is the job of the church and some see this as the seat of authority. We are not Roman Catholics who view all authority as flowing from the Pope, but in the Anglican church we have bishops who are supposed to keep us on the right lines. Now the church's record on this is not too brilliant. At times in the past one group has thought it quite in order to kill another group with whom they disagreed, hardly paying any attention at all to Jesus' command to love your neighbour as yourself. The church is full of saints and sinners – who are often the same people. There certainly are people whose insight we should follow, but equally there are people who have lost

sight of what Christianity is all about. And people in between, who are simply speaking within the confines of what they understand and the society they live in.

So the bible needs interpretation and the church is not an infallible guide to interpreting it. Can reason help? Well, I think it can help, but like the other sources of authority, it is not an infallible guide. Reason helps to understand the context in which the scriptures were written. It helps us to understand the changes in society which have happened over the millennia. It helps us to see where we are being inconsistent. It can show us the natural world, the work of God's hands without the intervention of man, and a source of authority in itself. And it can help us to understand what makes us tick, the motivations which affect us and where our judgement might be clouded by self interest. But as for answering questions like, why are we here? or what should I do with my life? reason is no help at all.

So we use all sources of authority, but at the end of the day one has to admit that there is no certainty and anyone who thinks they have it is likely to be mistaken. But these issues do crop up and we do need to take action on them and to some extent it must be a matter of faith about which course of action we take. So let's take this homosexuality issue and see what we can make of it. Here's my own personal view. Taking the bible first of all, the references to homosexuality are few and somewhat ambiguous, although generally negative, but it is certainly not half so clear cut as adultery, stealing or murder.

The church on the other hand has been pretty much against homosexuality throughout its history, although I don't think it has been a major issue until recently when attitudes in society have softened. This has caused people to question exactly what is wrong with homosexuality and to try and answer with something more compelling than Paul thought it a bad idea. In fact thinking about it has caused people to think again about our whole attitude to sexuality and to come up with the insight that from a Christian point of view sexuality is more about the expression of love than the procreation of children. One could develop this further, considerably further in fact, but the upshot seems to be that there is no real reason to think that homosexual love should not be as fulfilling as heterosexual love. This seems to me to be pretty convincing and I am with the American church in this.

Of course, some homosexual behaviour is outrageous, but then so is some heterosexual behaviour, particularly in our modern society. But perhaps in condemning homosexuality in general we are missing the point about what sexuality is all about and in the process losing an opportunity to help people in what I can only call a fallen society.

People have taken some extreme positions on this and I do not think the divisions can be easily pasted over. To my mind, a split is inevitable and it may possibly involve the disestablishment of the church, not necessarily a bad thing. Diversity is a strength and looking at America as an example, diversity is much more likely to meet people's needs. We always seem to forget the 95% who don't go to church in our desire to preserve a national church which seems often out of touch with reality and irrelevant to those who don't go to it.

So this division which is facing us is something to pray about. But let's not pray for the survival of the church in any particular form but rather for the needs of the world and how, as a body of Christian believers, we can meet them..