



Sunday 28 May 2017
The Sunday after Ascension Day
Choral Evensong
2 Samuel 23 vv. 1–5
Ephesians 1 vv. 15–23

Kingdom Values...

Mercy

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May the words of my lips and the inspiration of all our hearts be acceptable to God +, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

The quality of mercy is not strained...it is enthroned in the hearts of kings, a quality of God himself.

Being both a Barrister and a priest I have the luxury of analysing the behaviour and attitudes of secular society over centuries and the behaviour and attitudes of the Church over the centuries and comparing the times that the one is more merciful and, dare I say it, Christian than the other.

In 1792 the island of St Vincent House of Assembly in the Caribbean banned the preaching of the Gospel to slaves. It was an intellectually faultless piece of legislation. Slaves were property with no human rights. It was as pointless, they argued, preaching to a slave as it was preaching to a chest of drawers, or a horse. Slaves, they argued were not really human. The reaction of the Church of England was fascinating. It obeyed the law without demure. The Gospel, it reasoned, was clear on this. Slaves were part of God's order. Neither our Lord nor any of the Apostles or Saints condemned the institution of slavery. St Paul, indeed, urged slaves to be obedient to their masters. So no Anglican lay or ordained preacher preached the gospel to slaves. Slaves remained excluded from the sacraments. The Church appeared to concur with the idea that Black people were not, in fact, fully human. Intriguingly the Methodist Church regarded the law as sinful and breached it and a Methodist preacher called Lumb was imprisoned.

It is of note that, when you visit St Vincent, you will see that the Anglican Cathedral is half roped off as its foundations are being eaten by termites whilst the Methodist Preaching Hall is packed out.

It took another 41 years for slavery to be abolished in the colonies. The Church of England did not cover itself in glory in the battle for emancipation. It was a substantial owner of slaves in the Caribbean. The church's missionary organisation, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, branded its slaves on the chest with the word SOCIETY to show to whom they belonged. The debates in the House of Lords about abolition were contributed to by various Bishops objecting strongly to the abolitionists call. Eventually the voices of reason prevailed and the Church accepted that black people were in fact, fully human.

Women were denied the vote in the UK until 1918. The argument was that women, with their less developed bodies and smaller brains simply weren't equipped for certain jobs and certain decisions. The argument was that when confronted by something as complicated as a vote women would collapse with neurasthenia and die of embroidery or some such exotic Victorian malady. The church fully supported this. The Bible was clear. St Paul tells us that women have to be subject to their husbands. Both Society and the Church were firmly of the view that women were not, in fact, fully human. Society moved first, granting women the vote and allowing them to gain degrees and even to become members of the Bar and the Judiciary. The Church only acknowledged women's full humanity much later by allowing them to be ordained Priests in 1994 and as Bishops in 2015.

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In the real world the effect of treating human being as not being fully human had the most devastating effect on twentieth century history. During the second world war the de-humanising of other humans reached its nadir in the death camps of the Nazis. At the conclusion of the second world war, in 1953, the European Convention on Human Rights was drafted. It was drafted in the main by British Lawyers. It set down the minimum rights for human beings. Liberty of religion, freedom of movement, of family life, marriage, a fair trial and freedom from discrimination. It has always been my view that the ECHR is a fundamentally Christian text reflecting the Psalmists view that each human being is 'fearfully and wonderfully made'. Not just the white ones, or the male ones, all of us.

Homosexuality was decriminalised in the UK in 1967, but forbidden and condemned by the Church of England. The Bible was clear on the fundamentally abhorrent nature of homosexuality.

Society went further with the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the Race Relations Act in 1976 making it unlawful to treat people of different races of genders differently. Then the Disability Act was passed in 2010. Again three profoundly Christian piece of legislation respecting God's creation.

Then Society went further still and allowed peoples of the same genders to enter civil partnerships in 2004 and to marry in 2013. A further step forward in acknowledging the human dignity of all peoples for being human. Being made in God's image, being the perfection of God's creation.

The Church however couldn't cope with this and demanded, and got, an opt out banning same gender couples from marrying in Church and its priests from being married to people of the same gender.

Society moved still further with the introduction of the Equality Act in 2010. The Equality Act made it unlawful to discriminate directly or indirectly against individuals on the basis of their gender, sexuality, age, disability in fact anything that makes human kind varied and different. This was an act that took as its fount and summit (whether it knew it or not) the idea that all of God's creation in humanity was fearfully and wonderfully made. The Church again, applied for, and was granted an 'opt out' on the basis (and I summarise) that discrimination on the grounds of Homosexuality was a Christian virtue. It was a core doctrine.

The House of Bishops reinforced this by stating that its priests, if they were gay men or women, would have to take a vow of celibacy. Gay men and women should not be considered for training as priests and, if they were training, should not be ordained if they were not celibate.

There can, in my submission be only one conclusion to this. The House of Bishops, unlike secular society, does not believe that homosexual men and women are fully human. The one area that defines them in a different way to others is to be denied, closed down, pushed back in the closet, repressed and despised as being intrinsically unhuman. No black person was told that they could ordained as priest, Bishop or even Archbishop on the sole condition that they should wear 'white face' make up. No woman was told that they could be ordained as priest, Bishop or even Archbishop on the sole condition that they should stop menstruating. No disabled priest was ever ordained on the sole condition that they hid the wheelchair in the vestry. But gay men and women have been told that what defines them most profoundly is repugnant to the Church. What was the basis for this?

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Marriage and Same Sex Relationships after the Shared Conversations A Report from the House of Bishops
*“serious study of scripture and theology has reached conflicting conclusions in the way we handle the faith we have inherited. It is also felt keenly because of the position of the Church of England within the Anglican Communion and the worldwide Church, since the question of proclaiming the gospel within culture **must take account of the widely differing cultures around the world**, where human sexuality is often a touchstone issue, but in contradictory ways.”*

I agree that human sexuality is a touchstone issue in many cultures. The ‘contradictory ways’ that their Lordships dance around is the belief in many cultures that homosexuality is criminal. In Uganda the law criminalises all homosexual acts. One might think that would be an appalling breach of their human rights. The original law was struck down for being passed by a non quorate parliament. What was the reaction of the Anglican Church? I quote from the Uganda Guardian. Which may have few of the same liberal views as the Manchester Guardian:

Uganda’s top Anglican leader criticized the constitutional court for striking down the country’s controversial anti-gay law on a technicality (!), saying the law is still needed to protect children and families from Western-imported homosexuality(!).

The law punishes homosexual acts with life imprisonment.

Uganda’s religious leaders had widely supported the law, but opposed an earlier clause threatening the death penalty for some homosexual acts. Most Ugandan church leaders say homosexuality is against God’s order and African cultures. Such a law was needed to protect families, children and youth, the leaders stressed.

I am sorry, but I do not believe I have to take account of that aspect of a different culture. The idea of capital punishment or life imprisonment for consensual acts between adults should be condemned is abhorrent.

I do not remember being chided by the church to respect cultural differences when I marched against Apartheid.

My gay and lesbian friends ask me why I belong to such an institutionally homophobic organisation. I simply ask them to come and see my parish church, or practically any parish church in the country where the love of God is made manifest by acts of generosity and openness, of tenderness and care. The homeless are given a bed, the hungry are fed from soup kitchens and food banks, the elderly and lonely are visited, the sick are treated, the confused are reassured, addicts are helped, the infuriating are tolerated, the angry are calmed, the frightened comforted, the dying cared for and the holy sacraments are distributed without fear or favour.

The Church has to recognise what it means to be ‘Fearfully and wonderfully made’. Not ‘fearfully’ creating fear or ‘fearfully’ living in fear or ‘wonderfully made’ wondering why people are the way they are or ‘wonderfully made’ wondering what two people who love each other do in bed.

On the day I was asked to preach this sermon I received a letter from the Bishop of Southwell’s solicitors informing me that if we continued to appeal his decision to remove Jeremy Pemberton’s licence for marrying his husband then they would bankrupt him. Of course, I mean, what would Jesus do? And, we know, that the quality of mercy is not strained.



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As I put that letter to one side I started to prepare for Mass the following Sunday I looked at the Collect, which I leave for your contemplation and offer to the House of Bishops gratis:

Collect second before Lent:

Almighty God,
you have created the heavens and the earth
and made us in your own image:
teach us to discern your hand in all your works
and your likeness in all your children;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who with you and the Holy Spirit reigns supreme over all things,
now and for ever.