

“Holding Together in a Lost Church”

(Romans 14.1-14)

Grant Bullen

A Challenging Question

This week... a friend put a challenging question to me. He’s disappointed with what he sees as a lack of direction from Anglican Church leaders in the *redefinition of marriage* debate. “*Will our church ever again be able to take a strong stand on these matters – come out and say clearly what is wrong and what is right – or are we evermore doomed to being equivocal... because we don’t want to offend anyone... don’t want to be unpopular?*” It’s a damn good question... and it’s exercised my head and heart ever since...

We can and do speak out on *some* moral and political issues...¹ Recently, for instance, our Archbishop came out very publicly against *domestic violence*. But when it comes to contentious debates like *the redefinition of marriage* – (and soon we’ll find ourselves in very similar territory over *euthanasia*) – our archbishop... and our parish priest (with the backing of parish council), have chosen *not* to give a definitive lead. Why?

- Because we know there is divided opinion amongst us as Anglicans... All of us doing our best to be faithful... and yet we come to different conclusions. We *don’t* have a common voice on this.
- And because we know this is not just an *issue*... it is about people and their lives. We desperately want people to feel at home... safe and included... in our church... in this parish.

As your parish priest, I *am* very cautious about this. Other priests are choosing differently – they’re making it clear to their people where they stand. But not me...

¹ *Slavery* for instance – we can be totally unequivocal about that. It’s wrong! And yet it was only a couple of hundred years ago, that we were totally riven over this issue... with pro-slavery Christians quoting Paul and chunks of the OT, to authenticate the *ownership* of other human beings.

Recently our Archbishop and other leaders came out very publicly against *domestic violence*. We can be strong and unequivocal about that... And yet, some of our churches still teach the *headship of men*... which is a proven breeding ground for violence against women.

Even in what should seem obvious and beyond question, the church struggles to find one voice.

I wasn't always like this... As a younger priest I would often preach overtly political sermons. I thought it was my duty, not only my right, to tell my people what *the* Christian response was in contentious matters... at very least, to tell people where I stood! And I'm not saying I'll *never* do that in my time here. (I have a particular disgust with old politicians sending young men off to war... and so I'd struggle to stay silent in that eventuality...) But I am very cautious now, and there are reasons *why*.

I went straight from my conversation with my friend... to sitting with the *Romans* text for today... and you'll see why this sermon *had* to be preached...

Holding Together

Pauls says,

"Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently." (14.1)

I really value the freedom and respect that is a hallmark of Anglican churches such as ours... where we can live together without always agreeing on every issue. As your priest, I proclaim the gospel as powerfully and helpfully as I can... but I want you always to know that it's *your* choice... how you respond to Christ's invitation. It's not my place to tell you what to do. I want to lead in such a way that you are completely free and comfortable to meet me at the door at the end of worship and say, *'Thank you for that good sermon Grant... and I totally disagree with everything you said'...* knowing that I'll take no offence at that... and that we stay in loving relationship with each other regardless. The bonds of affection and community between us are not dependent on our agreement.

Holding together, particularly in times that are very difficult for the church, really matters. Even if it is a reflection of our weakness, holding together does need to be given a priority.

Somewhere along the way I learned this... and it changed me as a priest. But it's the next one that's the BIG one for me...

Being Responsible

Paul says,

“Do you have any business crossing people off (God’s) guest list or interfering with God’s welcome? If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learned, God can handle that without your help... ¹⁰⁻¹² So where does that leave you when you criticize a brother? And where does that leave you when you condescend to a sister? I’d say it leaves you looking pretty silly—or worse. Eventually, we’re all going to end up kneeling side by side in the place of judgment, facing God... So tend to your (own) knitting. You’ve got your hands full just taking care of your own life before God. ¹³⁻¹⁴ Forget about deciding what’s right for each other. Here’s what you need to be concerned about: that you don’t get in the way of someone else, making life more difficult than it already is.”

Some years back I learned that at the end of the day, there is only one life I’m responsible for... and that’s my own. What I mean is... when it comes to Judgement – whatever that experience of final accountability before God looks like – God will ask me what I did with *my* life. And if I try to deflect God’s gaze, by comparing myself to others, God will be adamant... *‘No, Grant... that’s none of your business. It’s your life – and only your life – that we’re talking about.’*

I realised how focused I was in critical judgement of others... and how that attitude crept into my preaching too. It *is* still a temptation... Every time I sit prayerfully with Scripture, my first thought is, *‘Boy, the parishioners REALLY need to take this seriously! THEY really do!’* But I know now, this is my mind trying to avoid the challenge that God is giving ME! So every sermon I preach now is about ME... with the embarrassing personal details expunged. Someone wise once taught me... *‘Every sermon is the congregation listening-in, to a conversation between the priest and God.’* I’m not telling you what YOU should do. I’m trying to be helpful as your priest, but at the end of the day, YOU are responsible for what you do with your life. You have to wrestle with the faith and make your own life decisions.

Paul is saying, *‘We’ll all end up in that experience of judgement... So tend to your (own) knitting. You’ve got your hands full just taking care of your own life before God.’*

In this morning’s text – (not everywhere in his writing) – Paul speaks in favour of that decision made by our archbishop, parish council and me... to prioritise inclusion of all people. *“Do you have any business crossing people off (God’s) guest list or interfering with God’s welcome?”*

And then he goes on...

“If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learned, God can handle that without your help...”

I know fellow priests who still have genuine concerns about the rightness of the ordination of women... and yet who faithfully serve, respectfully and lovingly alongside women clergy... because they say... that at the end of the day, it's not their business to decide... and if a correction does need to happen sometime in history, then God will look after this. I have great respect for these men...

Conclusion

But to go back to the original question from my friend... *“Will our church ever again be able to take a strong stand on these matters – come out and say clearly what is wrong and what is right – or are we evermore doomed to being equivocal... because we don't want to offend anyone... don't want to be unpopular?”*

I think our current caution *is* a sign of our weakness... As a church we are troubled and uncertain... about who we are, what our place in society is... and even about what we really believe. I think we need to accept this current reality – *weakness* – and hold together as best we can through this difficult time.

Will it change? Yes, I think it will... with time... and with the learning that only comes through suffering. Two simple things I'd say (without starting another sermon...)

- we will get much smaller yet, and our minority status will make for a clearer distinction between church and society;
- and the message I'm hearing from the Spirit is... ***‘You need to learn to BE the church.’***²
When we do return to faithfulness and integrity to the Gospel... then we'll know what to say.

Meanwhile I'm very grateful – even proud – to belong to a church where my friend and I can have this conversation... not coming to an agreement... probably voting on opposite sides in the marriage survey... and yet walking away with deeper respect and affection for each... hanging together as Christians on a journey.

² We are so lost and confused about what it means to live faithfully as Christ's community... no wonder we don't know what to say.

And I'm fascinated to hear Paul, talking to a church in such a wildly different context from ours... and yet saying,

"Forget about deciding what's right for each other. Here's what you need to be concerned about: that you don't get in the way of someone else, making life more difficult than it already is."