

**Trinity 13, 10.09.17**

**Matthew 18.15-30**

As a member of the General Synod I get quite a lot of what you might call lobbying emails - some personal, most mass mailings – but one caught my eye a couple of weeks ago because of the striking title of the sending organisation. It was from the ‘Narrow Way Christian Church of God’. It contained an email trail between them and the Chair of the group of MPs known as ‘Christians in Parliament’. It was fulminating against the possibility of same-sex marriage being forced upon the Church of England.

*I consider it alarming that career politicians are now emboldened enough to “descend” upon the Church of England to subtly bully the Church to violate the clear teachings of the Bible against homosexual relationships...*

*Stonewall UK and Pro LGBT officials/activists (both secular and religious) would rather split and destroy the Church, than have the Church continue to remind them of their rebellion against the sexual Laws [with a capital L] of our Creator God.*

*It seems obvious to whoever would admit it that Pro LGBT officials/activists have the same goal as Islamic Extremists, like ISIS, to silence/control Bible ABIDING Christians....*

*Just as ISIS eventually slaughtered unyielding Bible ABIDING Christians, Pro LGBT officials/activists are now working very hard to indoctrinate/bully the entire society via the education system, the media and various government institutions in order to promote/enhance a phobia against Bible ABIDING Christians that will eventually lead to Society’s acceptance of the mass slaughtering of Bible ABIDING Christians.*

He got a curt response from the MP Gary Streeter, The chair of Christians in Parliament:

*As Chair of Christians in Parliament I strongly condemn your approach and your language. Sadly, you have no understanding of biblical truth.*

*Gary*

*Dear Gary,*

*I do expect the Chair of Christians in Parliament to know for sure that only Bible-ABIDING Christians will escape hell Fire. All other Christians will be cast into OUTER DARKNESS:*

*Mt 8:12 But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth....*

*Remain Blessed in Christ Jesus,*

*Tennyson*

I would like to suggest that Tennyson is wrong on two counts:

First in suggesting that our Creator God has sexual Laws which the Church should be upholding. That is wrong because we are not a people of the Law but a people of grace and of faith. St Paul writing to the Galatians says that the Law was given as a disciplinarian until faith would be revealed, but now that faith has come through Jesus Christ we are no longer subject to the Law (see Galatians 3.23-26); writing to the Ephesians he says that Christ has abolished the Law with its commandments and ordinances. (Ephesians 3.15), and in today’s NT reading from the mighty letter to the Romans, Paul – as Jesus before him – recasts the negative prohibitions of the Law as outworkings of the higher positive principle of love and of loving your neighbour as yourself. Love, he says, is the ‘fulfilling of the Law’. The word he uses is pleroma which means fullness, completion, sum total. Love of neighbour, if you like, is the big picture; the old laws were partial ways of living it out.

That doesn't mean that anything is OK; it doesn't mean that traditional Christian sexual teaching has been wrong. It does mean that it can never be absolute or uncontested. There is always a bigger picture and a larger purpose.

Notice incidentally that the overarching principle and virtue is love of neighbour. Our gospel reading is the one occasion in the gospels when Jesus seems to direct his teaching directly to the behaviour of the early Christian church and what to do if your brother or sister sins. What is really interesting is that Jesus leaves nothing about the church judging what goes on in the bedroom – except in the sense that what he gives us is applicable for the bedroom, the boardroom and anywhere else. And it's all about what you do if you think your brother or sister has sinned against you – in other words, failed to love you as his or her neighbour. Sin here is a breakdown in relationship, not the breaking of an abstract law.

And what a brilliant way he gives us of dealing with things when they go wrong in the church. If someone has wronged you – and I don't think he's thinking of trivial things here, but the sort of stuff that might otherwise go to a court of law – our first reaction is to try to sort things out one-to-one; if that doesn't work then try to sort it out with one or two others and only if that doesn't work go to the whole church community for their judgement. The whole church community is given an astonishing delegated authority from God, if you like.

*What you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*

The church is trusted to make decisions and judgements. It's as though both Jesus and Paul are saying that it no longer works like a divine court up there making rulings on what we do – we are trusted to come to a mind on things, to exercise judgment.

So when the church has to make a call about how to respond to some of the complex moral issues of our day, whether that be concerning when to turn off a life support machine, how to co-operate with other nations or how to respond to requests for prayer for those who have changed gender – there is not necessarily a right answer waiting to drop out of heaven. The church's responsibility is to listen to what has been given to us, Holy Scripture; 2000 years of Christian thought, teaching and practice; the experience of Christians, indeed of everyone, today. The Church of England has ways of doing this, including its General Synod, but we also recognise that we are only a small part of the whole church and therefore must be careful in just deciding for ourselves. That means we cannot and shouldn't rush into decisions, pronouncements and judgments.

And I think Tennyson was wrong about a second thing. While of course Jesus taught about 'the narrow way' - which is difficult to find and it's rare that people find it - I do not think he intended that to mean a narrow church. The Church of England by its very nature and constitution is a broad church and that isn't just because it can't quite make up its mind about anything. We are a broad church because the brutal facts of our history suggest that it's either that or we split into several churches. We had a civil war in this country in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and that was partly about politics – King or Parliament – and partly about religion - a Puritan church or a broad church. The Puritans in the end lost the argument because of the inability of many of them to be able to understand or sympathise with their opponents. There was a lot of good about the Puritans, much more I suspect than our contemporary culture would give them credit for, but ultimately they failed because they wanted a church of the narrow way, and I do not believe that that is faithful to the vision of Jesus Christ and the New Testament. The principle of Jesus for individual disputes must surely also be a principle for disputes between different groups of Christians – talk together first, listen to one another, then if necessary seek mediation, and if that fails bring the matter to the whole church for judgment. Causing premature schisms and division is not, I believe, in accord with the command to love our neighbour. I therefore regret the decision of the Archbishop of Nigeria this week to boycott a meeting of archbishops called by the Archbishop of Canterbury for next month. I fear the onset of

civil war in the Anglican Communion and, to an extent, in the Church of England. Surely there is more jaw-jaw to be done before war-war. The way may indeed be narrow but the mercy of God is wide and his love embraces us all. If loving our neighbour is the overriding commandment I cannot see how breaking communion with him or her can be the right thing to do.