

Sermon preached at King's College Cambridge

Sunday June 30th 2019 - Trinity 2

'...let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth.'

1 John 3.18

Fifty years ago exactly, New York was waking up to an abruptly altered atmosphere. There had just been two nights of rioting around the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village. The Stonewall had been a big but dingy bar run by the Mob, with watered-down drinks and no fire exits to speak of. But here, in defiance of the law, queer people could drink and dance and meet and feel a tiny bit safer from hate and prejudice. Many were so poor that they slept on park benches, usually because they had been turfed out of their homes by their horrified families.

Although the neighbourhood police were paid off on a weekly basis, there were also frequent raids. Effeminate men and butch women were particularly vulnerable to arrest; and heaven help you if you were trans. In late June 1969 the clientele and their friends in the area had had enough, and a raid was rebuffed, turning into a riotous push-back against the police.

This began years of energetic, brave, determined campaigning for rights and respect. The Pride movement had been born.

Fifty years later things are much better for some people in some places. In many countries in the world, legal provision – including for equal marriage – is substantial and powerful. Social normalisation has happened too, with LGBTQ people routinely knowing affirmation and love, not rejection and aggression. And we've reached this point in spite of, rather than because of, the attitude of many religious people and religious bodies; not least the Church.

But... there are still countries where the law, and indeed social pressure, is toxically and viciously repressive of LGBTQ people. In only 18 of the 53 Commonwealth countries has there been legalisation. In the others punishment ranges from imprisonment and hard labour to execution. In some of these places the Church – the Anglican Church – is not just complicit, but actively supportive of the repression.

Meanwhile it feels like there is a reactionary resurgence in the more liberalised jurisdictions of the world. Prejudice and hate are rearing their heads again, and violence is on the rise. So Pride marches and gatherings, which for years have been more about celebration, more Mardi Gras than demo, are having to add protest back in. And amongst them, more and more, you will see Christian people, priests included, visibly identifying themselves as supporting the LGBTQ community, often as members of it themselves.

For a long time, increasing numbers of Christian people have come to reject the old nostrums about sexuality; and, more recently about gender identity. This has arisen in various ways: often in terms of specific biblical engagement, through rigorous and faithful study – (read and read, but never 'read into'); and, more widely, in a deepened

understanding of what Jesus' command to love might actually mean. I'm not going to repeat the arguments here.

You won't see Stonewall mentioned in the Church calendar for this weekend (it's only a matter of time...); but you will see that it is Peter-tide, the time to celebrate that greatest of the apostles, St Peter. Despite – maybe even because of – his impetuous and unreliable character (yes, he was a human being), Jesus trusted him to be the foundation of the Church. 'You're the rock I'm going to build my church on', he said. Peter may not have quite twigged what this would mean straight away. And you can imagine him thinking, 'what me?'

So this is, for obvious reasons, the time when new priests and deacons are ordained. Ordinary people are entrusted with extraordinary responsibility, not through any merits of their own, but because a series of faithful people who know them have recognised their capacity to be set apart in this way. Each of us has a vocation, not just priests. And true vocation is as much mediated through the discernment of others as it is by our own introspection: perhaps more so. I certainly needed a lot of encouragement to get past the 'what me?' sense of inadequacy. I still do. We struggle to believe that we can do what God is calling us to do. I suspect this is part of the bigger challenge: which is to believe that we are as loved by God as Jesus shows us we are.

It's one of the scandalous glories of the Christian faith that every single person is loved by God: utterly unique in his eyes, and utterly loved. This is one of the ways we might re-purpose that 400-year-old (George Herbert) phrase, *heaven in ordinary*. What we do will often not be very lovable, or indeed be very loving. But I'm pretty convinced that God loves us however our own real way of loving really works. That's rather a dense sentence, so I'll repeat it: God loves us however our own real way of loving really works. It's that sort of thinking that inspires me and so many other Christians to push back against prejudice and taboo. That means going on Pride marches sometimes. We may not need to riot again – yet – but we should be riotously energetic in our quest to understand the love that God puts at our disposal, and exercise it. It's part of our vocation! We are each called to a way of loving, and to a way of being. And, to come back to our text, it's just one way to do what St John bids us:

...let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth.

1 John 3.13-end; Luke 14.16-24

*Andrew Hammond
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