

Sunday 15 May 2011

Sermon preached by Revd Canon K.V. Kennerley

You may well wonder why I should have been asked to speak here on IDAHO Day. I wondered the same myself. This time last year I had barely worked out that the day's title had nothing to do with the American state of that name, but stood for International Day Against Homophobia. Oh dear!, I thought. I don't much like days that are AGAINST anything or any one – particularly in church.

That's because as today's NT reading reminds us, “Christ has abolished the law - (that's the law regarding the division of Jews and Gentiles) - so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, to reconcile both groups to God in one body, putting their hostility to death through the cross”. Divisions between human groups and communities and factions are not of God; divisiveness is against the teaching and practice of Christ; so let us strive not to define ourselves as AGAINST but FOR other human beings, however badly they may have behaved, however different their culture and traditional values are from our own.

But perhaps it is permissible to be against abstract concepts:

“What do you think about sin?” an apocryphal clergyman was once asked. “I'm against it!” he replied. Yes, of course we are “against” sin, and I imagine every one here is “against” homophobia, in the sense that we deplore anti-gay rabble-rousing and incitement to hatred and violence, and we vigorously condemn the murder of any one on account of their sexual orientation or life style, as happened in Uganda early this year to David Kato – just as we condemn the recent gang-rapes of Lesbian women in South Africa, and the murders of gay men in our own city for that matter. Or any murder. Indeed we may conscientiously feel moved to sign petitions or write

letters to the newspapers to express our outrage and our solidarity with the victims.

So we **ARE**, I think I can safely say, “**AGAINST**” homophobia – against irrational fear and revulsion and aggression with regard to gay, Lesbian and transgendered people, aggression driven by whatever threat it might be imagined they represent. We are civilised, reasonable Christians, and I do not need to preach “against” this violent sort of homophobia to any one here.

But homophobia as an emotional state is only one of many phobias or irrational antagonisms that threaten the full flourishing of humanity made in the image of God. Perhaps because the primitive extended family or tribe had to compete for food and territory with neighbouring groups, it's all too natural for us to set ourselves in opposition to The Other, the Stranger, The Out-Group. The scape-goating ritual found in the Old Testament is repeated over and over again in human history, as we blame The Other for whatever is wrong in our situation, and do our best to expel them and to deny them the justice and the respect that is their due. Looking only at the history of the past hundred years, it could be Jews, women, the mentally or physically handicapped, Blacks, Asians, Muslims, the American right, the Communist Left, even Christians of different traditions to our own, or “secular humanism”, which I have heard ferociously denounced from an Irish pulpit. We need to be aware of our tendency to exclude whatever or whoever is alien, strange and unfamiliar to us. We need to take steps to correct any such alienophobia in ourselves, including, if the caps fits, any residual unease about accepting the committed gay partnerships in our community.

Christ came to rescue us from such primitive antagonisms, to put an end to divisiveness and mutual exclusion – teaching us to accept and respect one another by his constant acceptance of the marginalised, the sinners, the unclean and the outcasts, overcoming our alienations by his self-

offering on the cross. But too often we refuse to be rescued; we even see Christians delighting in their dissensions; and the tragedy of the David Katos of our generation is compounded by the vehemence with which Anglican Christians around the world have recently been rejecting one another over sexuality issues and continue doggedly to do so. And to be frank, I see the Anglican Covenant, which our General Synod just “subscribed”, as inviting the quarrels to continue, laying down the ground rules for future challenges from one province to another in relation to a variety of areas which may legitimately vary between cultures. I appear to be in the minority, I know, but it seems to me that the Covenant's attempt to promote and enforce concord risks making fragmentation all the more likely. It might have been more effective to have simply called Christians of different cultures and traditions to respect one another's integrity and good faith, and to show Christ's love, not condemnation, to those from whom they differ, allowing that a variety of interpretation is inevitable in any church community.

So much for the questions relating to group identities and competing cultures.

There remains the question of our own personal world and the way we conduct our relationships, even the way we approach scripture in relation to ethical questions on which we differ from one another. And in this area let's concentrate on the matter of same-sex relationships once more.

It wouldn't surprise me to be told that many of us here, while declaring ourselves “gay friendly” and intolerant of homophobia, still find ourselves confused by what seems to be the condemnation of same-sex relations in the Bible. And while I am personally convinced after much study and meditation, that there is nothing in scripture which condemns faithful and committed sexual relationships between partners of the same gender, I have to recognise that there are many Christians who have not yet

come to the same conclusion. I may hope that the Holy Spirit will so lead them, but I must also be aware that we can *all* fall into the trap of interpreting scripture to fit our own world view, rather than allowing it to challenge our preconceptions. So I think some all-inclusive Bible study sessions are called for.

We ourselves may also harbour, even subconsciously, elements of the traditional fear of homosexuality because we have not got around to carefully reconsidering all the traditional views we grew up with. We need to do that work, not only for our own peace of mind, but so that we can help others to leave behind the once common view that all homosexuals are promiscuous, predatory and possibly paedophile, and to recognise the moral uprightness of the committed gay partnerships around us. Such couples demand our respect, our acceptance and full and unquestioned inclusion in the community of the church. They have been deeply hurt by the refusal of fellow Christians to offer them that acceptance and respect, and it is time we took steps to heal that hurt, by opening our hearts and holding out our hands to invite them in, asking forgiveness for our hard-heartedness.

That our church authorities have still not seen fit to offer such inclusion seems to me a scandal and a failure of Christian vision and leadership. It might even be seen as political cowardice. BUT, but, but . . . it is not quite so easy. Even our own House of Bishops is divided on the matter, and as I already pointed out, we do need to respect the conscientious views of others, even when they are hurtful to us or to our friends. And the prophet needs to keep in touch with all the people. So the only way forward I see is that of dialogue, mutual listening, in a setting in which we all pledge ourselves to be deeply open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. This is how we proceeded thirty years ago in the Women's Ministry Group in the Church of Ireland – no bra-burning or banner waving, but instead persistent invitations to discussion and a search for mutual understanding in which, while we

expressed hurt at being rejected, we still invited our opponents to express *their* anxieties and misgivings.

Changing Attitude Ireland has, I know, already made a start on this, approaching individual bishops to request conversation on the central issues; but far better than this one-at-a-time approach would be a meeting with a goodly number of bishops and opinion-leaders in the church simultaneously. Ideally we might hope for a widely attended Conference led by individuals who have studied the issues in depth, from biblical, theological and psychological perspectives. It will not be an easy road so long as the Anglican Communion remains conflicted and indeed confused on the issues; but it is a road we are called to take.

Inclusion, not exclusivity, is the Christian way – Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, and, by extension, gay and straight. I cannot believe that our saviour (who is not recorded as ever having addressed the issue of same-sex relationships) could lead us in any other way. But let us proceed gently and with understanding of the fears of those who differ from us. A little rhyme by Edward Markham shows us the way:

**“He drew a circle that shut me out,
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win,
We drew a circle that took him in.”**

*May the Lord of life, who loves all that he has made,
forgive us our hard hearts, our blindness,
Our cowardice, and our divisions,
and by the power of the Holy Spirit bring us together
into the peace and light of his eternal love. Amen.*