

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 23 Year A 2017

Most of us, I am sure, seek to avoid conflict. Most of us feel uncomfortable in situations of disagreement. Few, if any of us, prefer arguments and quarrels over peace, harmony and concord (though there are some who always seem to be itching for a fight...). Most of us prefer the quiet life and to dodge situations of confrontation and hostility. But we cannot always do so. As soon as there is more than one of us in any context there will be differences and disagreements, varied ways of looking at the world, interpreting the world. Sometimes we will let the differences slip by. Sometimes they will arouse in us a feeling of defensiveness. Sometimes our differences will lead to violence and bloodshed.

Even in the church, it will not surprise you, there are differences of opinion. Some of our differences we can pass off as 'matters indifferent.' Others will see us rally a battle cry. The gospel of Matthew is known as the 'Gospel of the Church'. It is his gospel (more than the others) which shows a particular concern for the identity and right ordering of the church. Today we have presented to us a very practical framework on how to deal with disagreement. Clearly there never a golden age for the church in perfect harmony with no disagreement or conflict. If there was, Matthew wouldn't tell what to do when things go wrong! The key to understanding Matthew's proposal is that our actions have public consequences, that we are accountable to each other, and that we must be willing to listen to each other.

This week the September edition of the Melbourne Anglican arrived. And it would be fair to say it presents a fair share of contentious, divisive and difficult issues. In a somewhat predictable way, the editor has been careful to present two sides of each argument: the involvement of some Australian bishops in the consecration of a bishop to a church not in communion with ours; euthanasia; same sex marriage. As a church, all these are important issues. But for our country it is the issue of same sex marriage that has certainly captured the public imagination.

A commentary by the Archbishop published last week (and included for you in your pew bulletin today) is a sensible level-headed response, affirming the traditional understanding of marriage, but also asking for respect and courteous discourse with those whom we disagree. He rightly highlights how our church has a capacity to engage in robust debate. We pray that the discourse of our church may indeed be a conversation, and not the screaming match that is such a feature of public discourse.

I am realistic - and I know - that even in this church there are a variety of opinions on this matter. There is no reason why this ought to be a cause of division or conflict in this church. But there would be a strange silence from this pulpit – the elephant in the church, so to speak – if the issue was not addressed here. From this week, you will begin receiving your postal survey. You will be asked to respond out of your conscience. It is worth reminding that the primacy of conscience is a profound gift of the catholic theological tradition to our civic life. But on this essential point we must ask the question, *how is our conscience formed?* Our conscience is not our gut feeling, or our preferences, least of all submission to dominant ideologies.

Having completely abandoned the religious, ethical, moral, philosophical foundations of society most of the people around us have their consciences formed by popular culture. This is why so often we seem to be speaking different languages, why the basic concepts are so misunderstood. But as people of faith, our conscience is formed in the light of faith, anchored in the scriptures and the tradition of the church. So, when we speak of love, marriage and equality we mean different things. The categories, for example, by which our prayer book carefully outlines our sacramental understanding of marriage as *signifying the mystical union betwixt Christ and his church*, cannot be easily accommodated by secular humanist understanding.

In the forming of my conscience I maintain that marriage is the life-long union between a man and a woman. Along with the archbishop, I will be voting 'No.' I have been asked that if the law changes would I celebrate a same sex marriage. I answered No. In saying this, I am not denying people how and who they can love. Nor is it interfering in other people's lives. We need to remember marriage *is not* the institution by which we gain acceptance or value in society. The bully-boy assertion that the health and happiness of young men and women depends on whether they are able to marry or not has no grounding in scientific data. However, it needs to be stressed that our love for those for whom this issue is most close and personal is not lessened. To affirm traditional marriage is not to disparage or to diminish the worth and value of other life choices. And with profound gratitude I personally acknowledge those who are same sex attracted and contribute so richly to life of this parish. I hope you hear that with the sincerity with which it is offered.

The essential question of course is what we understand marriage *is* and what it is *for*. We have all heard the arguments saying same sex marriage is simply an issue of allowing people to love who they choose, and for that love to be recognised by the state. However, *it is not* the business of the state to intrude into matters of the heart. If we can only manage to say that marriage is about love, then we must also say that this is not the business of the state. I am staggered at how willingly and easily we hand over to the state matters which do not belong to them.

The only reason the state has an interest in marriage is because of children. Where procreation is *in principle* impossible, marriage is irrelevant and not needed. A couple who are infertile, or an individual who is impotent, does not change the definition of marriage *in principle* because between a man and a woman *in principle* procreation is always possible. It is that possibility which gave rise to the institution of marriage. When it is impossible – as a matter *of principle* – between two men or two women – not just *incidentally* impossible (as for an infertile couple) it is impossible *in principle*. If we say marriage can be between people of the same sex we are saying that marriage can be understood *in principle* apart from procreation. We have changed the definition in such a way as to destroy the necessity of the institution. The reason marriage has existed in human society was to regulate from a social point of view the duties and responsibilities attendant upon procreation. From a Christian point of view, we would say it was part of God's good ordering of creation. No amount of biological wishing thinking can change the facts: that it is, *in principle*, the union of a man and woman which furthers the generations; it is in principle an *impossibility* for a same sex couple to procreate.

Affirming this understanding is about highlighting how marriage, family and children have specific roles and purposes in society. There is nothing hateful or bigoted or intolerant in that. However, the push for same sex marriage is not actually about equality or love. It is about the radical social engineering of society and the forceful imposition of sexual and gender ideologies. This debate is about freedom of speech. It is about how children are raised and the rights of parents in how they raise their children. It is about freedom of religion. If you doubt that, the booklet on marriage handed to you today saw Archbishop Julian Porteous hauled in front of the Tasmanian human rights and equal opportunities commission as inciting hate. This is the taste of things to come, and repeated the world over.

Now these objections are readily dismissed as distractions, and as obstructing personal freedom. The freedom to choose is a powerful force, really the only moral absolute left in our culture. But as Christians we must surely reject the idea that our *identity* is defined by our sexual preference. Mark Durie from Oaktree Anglican church (in Caulfield in his little piece in the TMA this month) points to the controversial opinion of gay activist Jean-Pierre-Delaume Myard. He has argued, *'the LGBT community reduces homosexuals to their sexual identity. This is an insult, reducing us to a particular category of people, creating a de-facto inequality. Instead we want to be recognised for what we are, men and women, not in terms of sexual orientation.'*

My brothers and sisters, I take extra time on this matter with you today because I want to encourage you to allow your consciences to be formed in the light of God's law and of his Word. As people of faith - and in the forming of consciences on this matter - we want to affirm God's plan for creation. This must include the natural and common-sense affirmation of biology, the particularities and distinctiveness of the sexes. The good ordering of creation means the family born in marriage is the natural and proper place for children to be born. And the flourishing of human kind is not fulfilled by a reductionist vision dependent on preference and personal choice. God has a much bigger idea for our lives than that.

Matthew's gospel is a gospel of the church, showing how to manage conflict in the church. In the light of the gospel today, if anyone here thinks that what I have said is contrary to the law of Christ, please come and speak to me. But Matthew's Gospel is also the gospel of God's presence. For Matthew, Jesus is Emmanuel, *God with us*; the one with us to the end of the age. And as we hear today the one who is present to his church where two or three are gathered in his name. We may feel challenged at this time, and feel a great deal of pressure, especially those who seek to uphold traditional and orthodox teaching. We need not be captive to the dangerous assumption that the history only ever runs in one direction. But stay close to Christ and he will stay close to us. And if it is a challenge for us, let it also be for us a time of grace. Amen.