
St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

The Rev. Jonathan Gibson July 1, 2007

Canada Day: 10:00 am, Holy Communion

"Getting to the Heart of the Matter"¹
Isaiah 40:1-11; Luke 3:1-20

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, we thank you for the prophetic witness to the truth of your servant John the Baptist; help us now, by your Holy Spirit, to see the real issues at stake in the current disputes within the church and how we, too, can stand firm for the truth that all may receive the love and mercy of our Father in Heaven. Amen.

Introduction

Today we celebrate Canada Day. One of the biblical figures who has a special relationship to our country is John the Baptist. Pope Pius X in 1908 proclaimed John the Baptist the Patron Saint of French Canadians. So in Quebec, June 24th is a Provincial Holiday, the Feast Day of St John the Baptist. Because I was not here last Sunday when we were to mark his feast day, we are marking the Octave. John the Baptist is a man for our times. He was not afraid to stand up for the truth. His courage was such that he was willing to lose his life over a moral denunciation!

Now standing for the truth has never been popular because it makes others feel uneasy – we like to be liked and so don't want to do something that will stop people liking us. John the Baptist had no such reluctance. He "told it like it was" no matter who his audience was - ordinary folk, extortionists and soldiers – even King Herod himself. But his passion for the truth was not the result of some puritanical zeal for outward decency – he was concerned that people not living out the truth were in danger of God's judgment and missing out on being part of God's kingdom that was coming. This is why, after Luke records one of John's themes as "chaff burning up with unquenchable fire," he can say, "And with many

¹ Most of this sermon is taken from the Rev. Dr. Brett Cane's Sermon by the same title. He preached it at his parish of St. Aidan's Winnipeg on Sunday Morning, June 24th. I have adapted it slightly to pertain to the ACC now that General Synod is over. I want to thank Brett for the very clear presentation that helps us to see that to bless same sex relationships affects the core doctrine of the ACC.

other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them" (Luke 3:18). Hearing the truth may not be pleasant, but the purpose is to bring release and freedom.

It's a bit like comparing a trip to the dentist with eating a bowl of sugar and the effect of both on your teeth. A visit to the dentist may hurt your teeth, but it will not harm them. Eating a bowl of sugar won't hurt but it sure will harm! The truth may hurt, but it won't harm you.

This sermon is about uncovering and standing firm for the truth. As such, it will highlight divisions and differences – but it is done out of love and compassion. We speak the truth not to alienate and exclude, but to rescue and redeem.

Last weekend our General Synod made some crucial decisions regarding the blessing of same-sex unions. Thankfully the following motion, known as *A 187* was narrowly defeated:

"That this General Synod affirm the authority and jurisdiction of any diocesan synod,

- a. with the concurrence of the diocesan bishop, and
- b. in a manner which respects the conscience of the incumbent and the will of the parish,

to authorize the blessing of committed same-sex unions."

Lay delegates voted 78 to 59 in favor of the motion and clergy voted 63 to 53 in favor. But the House of Bishops voted 21-19 against it. As a result the motion was defeated, since it required approval by each of the three orders to pass.

This means that Dioceses are not to go ahead with the blessing of adult committed same sex unions. The next year will show us if Dioceses like Ottawa and Niagara will respect this decision. They are making a promise that regardless of the way the Synod voted they intend to decide at their next diocesan synods whether or not they will proceed. In New Westminster they have already been practicing the blessing and will I believe continue. I am grateful that our bishop, Derek Hoskin, voted against this motion.

So while many within the church see it as good news that *A 187* was defeated, the motion that was passed earlier on Sunday is very upsetting for me and others who hold to the same theological position. Before lunch, the General Synod was asked to vote on this motion, *A 186*:

"That this General Synod resolves that the blessing of same-sex unions is not in conflict with the core doctrine (in the sense of being credal) of the Anglican Church of Canada."

The vote was 152 for, 97 against in the house of clergy and laity and by a vote of 21 for and 19 against in the house of bishops.

What I think this motion means is that because there is no mention of same sex blessing in the Creeds, the Synod deemed they are not core doctrine. The Synod had decided, based on the recommendation of the St Michael Report, that doctrine which is creedal is core and all other doctrine is secondary.

Now we need to pause for a minute and understand what we mean by this word doctrine. It comes from the Latin *doctrina*. From this word we get the English words *doctor* and its derivative, *teacher*.

Doctrine is something that is taught, something that is held, put forth as true, and supported by a teacher, a school, or a sect.²

A person receives a doctorate when they are a master of an area of doctrine. They have studied in such depth that they are an expert in that field of knowledge. A Doctor of Medicine is a person who has a comprehensive knowledge of this science. So in its broadest sense doctrine extends beyond theology but has come to be understood particularly in relation to this field of study and knowledge.

Therefore for the General Synod to conclude that the blessing of same sex blessings is not in conflict with the core teaching of the Anglican Church of Canada is in error. I will argue in this sermon that to say that "the blessing of same sex unions is not in conflict with the core doctrine of the ACC" is a contradiction in terms. Now a contradiction in terms is a phrase that is confusing because it contains words that seem to have opposite meanings. Euro Disney seems to me a contradiction in terms because Disney is so typically American. For there to be a Disney Park in Paris seems so out of place when we think of France's current relationship to the United States. Some may say that a Calgary Summer is a contradiction in terms.

To say that the blessing of same sex unions is not in conflict with core doctrine is also a contradiction in terms. The Anglican Communion seems to see it as such. There are many in our world wide family who cannot fathom how we as a Province could support such a practice. The issue is so serious that it threatens to divide the Anglican Church in a way that is unprecedented.

Then there are others both outside the Church – and some within it – who wonder why we are making so much fuss over this issue. They say that the Church always gets upset about sex and what we really need to do is loosen up a bit!

² "doctrine." *Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged*. Merriam-Webster, 2002. <http://unabridged.merriam-webster.com> (29 Jun. 2007).

In response, I, and many others, have said that the whole same-sex question is not really the main issue - it is actually the tip of the iceberg of a much larger picture, and that what is really at stake are much more fundamental issues of faith and practice. How we view this issue does effect how we understand the core teaching of the Christian Faith. It is this relationship that I want to show you now.

Key issue

Before we begin, we need to understand that underlying the divisions facing the Church are two different ways of approaching the faith: revelation or evolution. One (Orthodox), affirms that God has revealed himself to us. This has happened in history and uniquely through Jesus, with Scripture as our final authority, guided by the wider church past and present, illuminated by our own reason and experience. The other (which is usually called "liberal") speaks of the faith more as an evolution of how humans have perceived the divine. It places human reason and experience as primary, with reference to the wider church as secondary and Scripture as an uncertain resource. One begins with God, the other begins with humanity. The different conclusions we reach are a result of this basic difference in perspective.

In this way, we see sexuality is not the real issue in our current crisis, but rather the tip of a huge iceberg whose real danger to passing ships is what's under the water not above it. Same Sex may get all the publicity and headlines, but in reality what we really need to pay attention to are the underlying layers which Canon Kendall Harmon and the Reverend Doctor Brett Cane³ have helpfully listed as follows:

- *Creation* – are we made in the image of God yet fallen or basically good with the innate ability to determine right from wrong for ourselves?
- *Marriage* – do we take seriously the unanimous Biblical witness about heterosexual marriage as a complimentary union between opposites and the only context for human sexual intimacy or do we invent a new category?
- *Church* – are we part of a larger world-wide church that makes decisions across cultural barriers or do we determine belief and conduct independently?
- *Scripture* – do we set ourselves under Scripture or over it?
- *Gospel* – do we see the good news of Jesus as the opportunity for repentance and transformation or merely inclusion and affirmation with no call to change?
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All these we could label as doctrines; whether they are core or not doesn't matter – they are all intertwined and each affects the heart of the faith. We will look at

³ Canon Kendall Harmon, Canon Theologian of the Episcopal Diocese of South Carolina, from "Choose This Day," video produced by Mark Cutshall Creative Services, 2005, and available on www.AnglicanDecision.com

each of them in turn.

Creation

The first layer of the iceberg below the surface is the doctrine of Creation. Scripture affirms that when God created the world and human-kind, it was good (Genesis 1:1-2:2). Humans were created in the image of God with inherent worth and great potential to do what is right. Humanity was expressed in two genders, male and female, each of which reflects God's image. Both approaches to faith would agree so far. But then, there is divergence. Genesis 3 tells us that human beings disobeyed God and so sin came into the world. What we are now "naturally" is not how God designed us to be. We can not assume that our natural inclinations are godly. "God made me this way" is no argument when it comes to determining behaviour. At the heart of the matter is the doctrine of Creation which says that we were made in God's image but that we have marred that image. "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out" (Romans 7:18).

Marriage

Closely following on the doctrine of Creation is the doctrine of Marriage. Before the fall, marriage is instituted as part of God's plan for humanity. In Genesis 1 (27) humans are created as male and female and this gender differentiation is spoken of as good. In Genesis 2, a different perspective is given. Humanity is seen as a solitary human and it is not good. God says, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (Genesis 2:18). Out of one being, God creates two. It is not another being of like gender that God creates as a partner, but one which complements the other – both anatomically and emotionally. Here, the emphasis is not on procreation, as in Genesis 1, but on "the relational (including physical/sexual) complementarity of male and female, that is, on the companionship and support provided by heterosexual marriage."⁴

As the Bible unfolds, every regulation affirming the sexual bond is that of a man and a woman without exception; all Old Testament laws and proverbs and New Testament passages regulating and establishing proper boundaries for relationships (e.g. Jesus in Mark 10, Paul in 1 Corinthians 7, etc.) are for heterosexual ones, none for homosexual. To this we add the heterosexual imagery in both Testaments of our relationship to God: God and Israel as wife; Christ and the Church as bride.⁵ When it comes to relationships, the Bible knows of only two categories - celibacy and heterosexual marriage. A homosexual union is a totally new category – by what authority could we ascribe God's blessing to this or say it is not in conflict with core doctrine? From a biblical

⁴ Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice; Texts and Hermeneutics*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), pg. 61.

⁵ E.g. Isaiah 62:5, Revelation 21:2.

understanding of Marriage, same sex blessings is a contradiction in terms. For we see that there is a unanimous Biblical witness to heterosexual marriage as a complimentary union between opposites and the only context for human sexual intimacy. "A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Genesis 2:23-24).

Church

To set out in a new direction requires an authority to do so. Here we come to the layer of the doctrine of the Church. When the Bible is not specific or is unclear about a particular aspect of belief or behaviour, we need to hear the Holy Spirit speaking through the Church to interpret and apply the Biblical text for the situation. This speaking happens across boundaries of both time and culture – we listen to the witness of the Spirit in different ages and different societies to ascertain the truth because no one era or civilization can uniquely claim to see perfectly the counsel of God. All societies are flawed and so must be open to correction; but also the light of Christ shines uniquely in every people group so each has a contribution to bring. This positive contribution of each national expression of the church is behind the statement in Revelation where we read: "The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into the (New Jerusalem)" (Revelation 21:26).

In Anglicanism, this is expressed by the fact that we are a "Conciliar Church." We operate through vestries and synods, Primates' Meetings and Lambeth Conferences. The principle is that the more important the issue the more widely you consult. This concern was shown in the recent Rupert's Land bishops' statement when they said that not only do we need to listen to others in the wider Church but we have a responsibility to offer them our perspective if God has truly illumined us. To make a major decision which departs from the Church's tradition past and present without wide consultation and agreement and to go it alone sets up ourselves as an independent body and negates the doctrine of the Church.⁶ At the heart of the matter is the nature of the world-wide Church as the Body of Christ with whom we are in communion and to whom we are accountable. "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

Scripture

The authority of the Church is related to the next layer of the iceberg from which it is derived, the doctrine of Scripture. In the current debate, the claim is made that "The Spirit may be leading us into new truth." One could quote Jesus' words in John 16: "When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). However, in its original context, it referred first of all to the teaching of the apostles. This teaching we now have enshrined in the New

⁶ Interestingly, most of the Province of Rupert's Land (the geographical provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba) Bishops voted against A 186 and 187.

Testament, along with the Old, which Jesus had already endorsed as authoritative. The Church is under Scripture, not vice-versa. Any new direction the Spirit leads will be in accordance and subservient to this teaching as found in Scripture.

Here, however, there is great debate about interpretation. All sides claim Scripture as their authority, but not all sides approach the Bible in the same way. First, we must see Scripture as a whole, not merely isolated proof-texts. For example, in the debate about the role of women in Church leadership, it is by setting specific negative texts into the whole framework of the liberation Christ has brought to women that we have come to our present positive conclusions about women in ministry. In the homosexual debate, questions about specific passages must be set in the Bible's over-all view of sexuality and male-female complementarity

One major argument brought against Scripture is the claim that much of it has been so conditioned by the cultural environment in which it was written, that it can never be taken at face value. People would cite the need for a woman to cover her head when she prays in 1 Corinthians (10:2-16) as a prime example of this. But here we must tread carefully, especially when dealing with moral issues. If certain things were culturally conditioned in Scripture, who's to say that our present cultural interpretation is any better?

Just a couple of weeks ago, Canon Michael Patterson, director of evangelism for the diocese of Niagara, was quoted as saying "Same-sex marriage is now the law of the land and the church needs to accept the reality of such unions or risk becoming irrelevant."⁷ Are we saying that our society's understanding is the correct one? What about Apartheid in South Africa or residential schools in Canada? Society was wrong about those.

At times the argument can border on cultural imperialism. A shocking example of this occurred over the debates on homosexual practice and the Church at the 1998 Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops from around the world when the outspoken liberal American bishop John Spong declared that African Anglicans were at a disadvantage in discussion of the issue because "They've moved out of animism into a very superstitious kind of Christianity. They've yet to face the intellectual revolution of Copernicus and Einstein that we've had to face in the developing world."⁸ Not only was this setting up the western scientific method as the supreme authority, it was oblivious to the fact that the African tradition might be able to see Scripture more clearly than we can. It is interesting that the push for the blessing of same-sex unions comes primarily from white western Christians.

⁷ As quoted by Stuart Laidlaw, Faith and Ethics Reporter, in the Toronto Star, Jun 02, 2007.

⁸ Transcript from interview with Andrew Carey released by *The Church of England Newspaper*, July, 1998.

At the heart of the matter is the word of God which reveals his mind and will to us and liberates us from being entrapped by our own narrow cultural perspective. "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Colossians 2:8).

Gospel

The final layer of the iceberg is the nature of the Gospel – the Good News of Jesus. Without a true doctrine of creation which acknowledges we are made in God's image yet fallen, there is no need for salvation. We just need to reach our full potential! In this way, inclusion and affirmation become the heart of the faith. Jesus doesn't have to die for us, he just sets a good example of being inclusive and affirming. Because there is no need for an objective salvation, then all religions are ways of experiencing the divine.

The comments of Bishop Ralph Spence of the Diocese of Niagara in Ontario (Hamilton and surrounding region) illustrate this "new gospel." He "describes himself as a 'theological conservative and a pastoral liberal.' He wants the door of the church held open to all who would enter... 'The Jesus that I see in the gospels reached out to everybody.'" ⁹ At General Synod the buzz word for the week was "We are to be an inclusive church." This was captured in the Theme motto "Draw the Circle Wide, draw it wider still".

Now the likes of Bishop Spence are absolutely right about Jesus reaching out to everyone, but that does not mean that Jesus approved of everyone's behaviour! The fact that he was compassionate to the woman caught in adultery and fraternized with tax-collectors and prostitutes does not mean he sanctioned adultery, economic extortion or prostitution! Unlike the religious leaders who condemned the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2-11) he accepted her ("Neither do I condemn you") but still viewed the act as sinful ("Go and sin no more"). At the heart of the matter is the gospel which is not merely inclusion and affirmation with no call to change but the opportunity for repentance and transformation through the empowering and indwelling Spirit of Christ. "Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved" (Ephesians 2:4-5).

When we see the whole of the iceberg and not just its tip, it is clear that for the Anglican Church of Canada to have passed A 186 was wrong. To say "That the blessing of same-sex unions is not in conflict with the core doctrine (in the sense of being credal) of the Anglican Church of Canada." is a contradiction in terms. While the society and country in which we live as Christians can allow for same sex marriage the church can never be a place where such relationships are blessed. For to do so would be in conflict with our doctrine of creation, marriage,

⁹ As quoted by Stuart Laidlaw, Faith and Ethics Reporter, in the Toronto Star, Jun 02, 2007.

the church, scripture and gospel. It would also fly in the face of the faithful courage our first generation brothers and sisters exhibited in the first century.

Conclusion

In the ancient Roman Empire, political dissent was seen as threatening to its security and so the “cult of the emperor” developed where he was declared divine. By acknowledging his divinity (along with whatever other gods you wanted to worship), you would affirm your loyalty to the empire. This was done by offering a pinch of incense and declaring Caesar “Lord” – nothing more - on an altar dedicated to him. The early Christians could not do this – only Jesus was Lord. This brought down the wrath of Rome. Well-meaning people would say, “It’s only a pinch of incense – it doesn’t mean anything.” But it did. Christians could not offer the incense because of what it ultimately stood for – an acknowledgment that Rome and its abuse of power were supreme. They knew the truth – only Jesus and his power of transforming love, shown through his giving of himself on the cross – were supreme. To offer incense would have betrayed all that Jesus stood for.

I propose to you that the blessing of same-sex unions is “The pinch of incense to burn before Caesar”¹⁰ for us today. It is the tip of the iceberg; it is merely the sign that points to the heart of the matter. Know what the real issues are and stand firm for the truth in love.

¹⁰ With thanks to the Rev. Canon John Paul Westin, St. Thomas’ Church, St. John’s, NF, for this illustration.