
St. Aidan's Sermons

Winnipeg, Manitoba

The Rev. Dr. Brett Cane, June 24, 2007

St. John the Baptist: 8:00 and 10:00 am, Holy Communion

“Getting to the Heart of the Matter”

Isaiah 40:1-11; Acts 13:14b-26; 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 a man who was not afraid to stand up for the truth and who lost his life over a moral denunciation - John the Baptist! 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 judgement 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 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 a 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.

This weekend our General Synod (has made) is making crucial decisions regarding the blessing of same-sex unions. It is such a major issue that it threatens to divide the Anglican Church, not only here in Canada, but world-wide. Many people outside the Church – and some within it – 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! 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. In the past months some people have come to me saying, “Pastor Brett, could you let us know what the other issues are?” This sermon is an attempt to answer that question by explaining what those issues are – and thus “get to the heart of the matter.”

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. 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 Harmon¹ has helpfully listed as follows (with adaptation):

- *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?

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 each of them in turn.

Creation

The first layer of the iceberg 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 is 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 two, 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.”²

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.³ When it comes to relationships, the Bible knows of only two categories - celibacy and

¹ 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

² Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice; Texts and Hermeneutics*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), pg. 61.

³ E.g. Isaiah 62:5, Revelation 21:2.

heterosexual marriage. A homosexual union is a totally new category – by what authority could we ascribe God’s blessing to this? At the heart of the matter is the 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 each people so each has a contribution to bring. I see this positive contribution of each national expression of the church behind the statement in Revelation that “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. 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 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. I would refer you to my paper on “the Bible and Homosexuality”⁴ for expansion on this.

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.”⁵ 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.

⁴ “The Bible and Homosexuality,” available on www.staidans-winnipeg.com.

⁵ As quoted by Stuart Laidlaw, Faith and Ethics Reporter, in the Toronto Star, Jun 02, 2007.

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.”⁶ 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.

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.’”⁷ Bishop Spence is 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).

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”⁸ 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.

⁶ Transcript from interview with Andrew Carey released by *The Church of England Newspaper*, July, 1998.

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

⁸ With thanks to the Rev. Canon John Paul Westin, St. Thomas’ Church, St. John’s, NF, for this illustration.