

Sermon – 9 July 2017 – St Mary’s Anglican Church, North Melbourne

The behaviour and language of bullies in the school playground would never be appropriate in church, would it? Members of the church would never speak to one another as Jesus characterises his detractors doing to him: “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’

And no-one in the church would ever decry natural human behaviour and represent it as debased or sinful, would they?

Well, maybe sometimes . . .

Jesus, not really very meek and mild when all is said and done, was rarely unafraid of calling out the religious leaders of his day for hypocrisy. The lectionary spares us the indignity of having to listen to the central part of today’s Gospel passage, but we need to hear it. Having told his audience off for behaving like playground bullies, he really calls in the big guns:

“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. “But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. “And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. “But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.”

Tyre and Sidon, heck, even Sodom. No holding back on the rhetoric here!

But, of course, though Jesus felt the need to employ elevated rhetoric in his day, we would never need to do it now, would we? Because Christians would never behave like naughty children in the playground, would they? Members of the church would never need to hear such excoriation, because we’re all enlightened by the Gospel and we dwell together in love and unity, don’t we? We listen to the Spirit, and act accordingly, always, even when the Spirit calls us to change, don’t we?

Or am I being too optimistic?

Perhaps.

A couple of weeks ago, the archbishop of Sydney and the bishop of Tasmania wrote open letters to the other bishops of the Australian church, explaining that they had decided, against the advice and wishes of the primate, Archbishop Philip Freier, to participate in the consecration of a bishop for the Anglican Church of North America, who would be a “missionary bishop” for Europe to “protect the gospel of Christ” against those who support same-sex marriage.

The first thing to understand is that the Anglican Church of North America is not, in fact, part of the Anglican Communion. It is a conservative break-away church, and neither the Anglican Church of Australia nor the Archbishop of Canterbury are in communion with that church. Thus, the participation of Archbishop Davies and Bishop Condie in the consecration of a bishop for that church is irregular in the extreme. It has even been argued that in doing so they may have broken their ordination vows.

The second thing to understand is why this new bishop was being consecrated: he is to be a missionary bishop to Europe and the UK, in response to recent decisions by the

Episcopal Church of Scotland concerning the marriage of gay people and the ordination of gay clergy. Canon, now bishop, Andy Lines, is to provide pastoral support for those clergy and congregations who feel that Scotland's decision has corrupted the church beyond the point of tolerance. The marriage of gay people has been elevated to a first order issue, and is now the line in the sand. Having lost on the ordination of women, this is the new conservative battleground, and they are not minded to lose again.

Archbishop Freier has been remarkably forthright in his response to Sydney and Tasmania's actions. In a very long letter of reply to the bishops of the Australian Church which you can find on his website, our archbishop outlines the legal, moral and theological reasons as to why the two bishops ought not to have done what they did. He summarises his view thus:

I have deep concerns that the participation by our Episcopal colleagues in the consecration of Canon Lines, with or without the support of their respective dioceses, is contrary to the spirit of the canons of the Council of Nicaea and, most importantly, outside of the authority of our National Constitution. It may also be outside the authority of the *Consecration of Bishops Canon, 1966* of the Anglican Church of Australia.

By employing the Council of Nicaea, the national church constitution and the consecration of bishops' canon as his arguments, the archbishop has elevated his language right up to the level of the woes Jesus pronounced upon Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. The heat of the rhetoric is, for this archbishop, positively boiling.

Those sympathetic to the views and actions of bishops Condie and Davies, unsurprisingly, have now condemned the archbishop for prioritising church law on ordination over God's law on marriage. They are wrong on both counts. The concern of Archbishop Freier, like the concern of the Council of Nicaea, is sound doctrine and the unity of the church – a unity that is maintained by things like rules around the consecration of bishops. Marriage, by contrast, is not a first order issue, and is most certainly not the litmus test for "the gospel of Christ". For Anglicans, marriage is an "office", not a dominical sacrament. Moreover marriage is not fundamentally a Christian concept, occurring as it does in almost every cultural and religious context. And as history shows, marriage has undergone quite radical changes during the Christian era. It is not immutable.

Our archbishop's concern for unity and good order in the church is the first order issue here, and in my view a better litmus test of a desire to defend the gospel of Christ. In this instance, then, our archbishop might be said to be standing up to the bullies in the church's playground; those who want to force the whole church to join them in playing grubby games, kicking sand in the faces of gay Christians and those in the church who love and support them. For a long time, in the interests of keeping the peace, the archbishop and most everyone else in senior leadership in the Australian church have tolerated and accommodated those others who have never hesitated to ramp up the rhetoric in support of their own anti-gay stance. Our archbishop, at last, seems to be responding to their taunts with language that, to my mind, reflects the language of Christ in today's gospel reading. Bishops Davies and Condie played the flute, but this time the primate has not danced. They wailed, but this time he does not mourn.

The archbishop is going to cop it big at general synod next month, for speaking the truth in love. But from me at least, he gets a standing ovation for getting things in the right order, and for following the example of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel.

- Craig D'Alton