

St Peter's, Ealing
Sunday 6th October 2024
19th Sunday After Trinity (Proper 22)

The kingdom belongs to such as these

You may or may not have noticed the church's angst filled discussions about gay marriage – or more particularly the marrying of gay people in church. Our discussions have been couched in the House of Bishop's report 'Living in Love and Faith', known as LLF. The debates in General Synod have been forthright and conviction filled. The House of Bishops have tried to keep the discussions open, generous and well natured. So far the Synod has reached the point of publishing prayers that can be said over a couple already in a legal relationship in the context of an existing service. To be clear these are not prayers of blessing or commendation.

However, some of our sisters and brothers believe this to be a step too far and have formed various ways to protest. One is to stop paying Common Fund to the Diocese whilst paying the same amount into an alternative fund known as The Ephesian Fund which is then used for ministry whilst not supporting the work of the Diocese.

St Helen's, Bishopsgate, All Souls, Langham Place and Holy Trinity Brompton, perhaps the three most influential evangelical churches in the Church of England today, have come out in opposition to the stance of Synod. They have set up an unofficial parallel church with overseers whose job is to guide the communities as they form their own training and operations programme. And one might argue today's gospel vindicates their stance.

Jesus seems quite clear; marriage is between a man and a woman where they become one flesh. You can't get much clearer than that can you?

Well, you know I'm going to suggest like most things this whole question is rather more complex than that, or at least more nuanced.

The context of Jesus' comments is set in the context of another question which is not about gender but divorce. This is a legal debate. The Pharisees, again, are trying to catch Jesus out with the intricacies of the law. His reply is not a statement of traditional gender politics; it is a reply to a legal question and his reply aims to clarify both the importance of the union of two people in a blessed, monogamous, lifelong relationship whilst highlighting the cynical, unjudicial stance of the legalistic Pharisees.

In this cultural, historical context the issue of gender/sex politics really is anathema, a non-argument as it was not on the mind and heart of Jesus.

The passage we read today splits into three sections. The first is the discourse with the Pharisees. The second is a discourse with the disciples. This seems to underline Jesus' statement of the nature of marriage and indeed it is. It is also a statement of the sanctity of God's blessing; God's consecration of two people in a lifelong, monogamous relationship. The real shift here is how Jesus draws a balance, an equality between men and women in marriage – this is a new position and one not upheld in marriage law of the day.

The third section of this passage seems completely unconnected with the preceding two. But I think Jesus is saying something quite important that reflects back upon his engagement with the Pharisees and the disciples.

In receiving the children he challenges those who live by legal strictures and detailed interpretation of scripture. Jesus is challenging them to receive the kingdom of God in a new way – with the simplicity and innocence of children. To receive the generous and unconditional blessings of God as children; ready and open to learning new ways of being, to receive others generously and innocently; to know the love received is for everyone.

We can be tempted to come to difficult questions of faith armed with legal and detailed argument that defend our own heartfelt positions. This is not surprising as these are the things that give us our foundation of surety and security. Yet Jesus challenges us because he has a different view, a different agenda, one that is always leading us to God. Here it is a message

that says before God we all stand as equals. Before God there is no inequality; we are equally loved by God completely and unconditionally and wholly; there is no difference – what happens to one happens to all.

Like the children, we are all equally blessed as we walk the way of God; the way of love. It is when we stop walking the way of God and God's love that we stop walking with God.

In all honesty I am not convinced God is bothered by human strictures and boundaries. Who marries whom, who lives with whom isn't of great concern to God. God's concern is how we love and honour each other; how we live our lives together and how we proclaim that love into the world. So much of life is couched in bigotry, hatred and prejudice; when we come to the world as the children of God we should come with love, from which comes everything else including acceptance, honour, understanding and openness. Jesus commanded us to love one another as he has loved us, let's struggle with that.