



into the Melting Pot

the question is more important than the answer

Sunday 12 May 2019

Living With Contradictory Convictions

In April, Roberta led the Circuit Service in conjunction with Melting Pot, and the piece below is her 'Dear Friends' item for the June Wider Horizons, based on that service.

How do friends stay together when they have different opinions about issues they believe important? We will all have known people who have fallen out over the years because they don't see eye to eye on a particularly issue. This is very sad as it means the opportunity to enjoy company and friendship and to learn from each other is lost. This happens in families and among friends and also within churches.

In April at Christchurch we hosted a Methodist circuit service in conjunction with 'Melting Pot' on the theme of "**Living with Contradictory Convictions**". The Methodist Church produced a report a few years ago (2006) under this title as an element of its "Pilgrimage of Faith". The Pilgrimage of Faith was begun in 1993 to enable people with different understandings of human sexuality and relationships to learn from each other and continue together as part of the same Church. This issue still challenges people but it is only one of many issues about which followers of Jesus differ.

At the recent circuit service we started by recognising the ways in which the followers of Jesus have differed about important issues from the earliest of days of the Church. The leaders in the early Church differed about whether those men who wished to join the way of Christ should be circumcised; then a few centuries later people in the Church disagreed about whether it was acceptable to fight in an army; then later still about the acceptability of slavery or apartheid and about the role of women in the Church. Across all the Churches we are not yet of a common mind about this last issue, nor other significant matters of life and death.

Behind some of these differences lies a variation in how the Scriptures are treated and interpreted. The differences are not so much about the importance of the Scriptures, as all those who seek to follow Jesus turn to the Bible to learn of him and are guided by the way in which Churches have treated the Bible, including using authoritative translations and compilations. The differences tend to lie in the diverse ways in which the Bible is interpreted and the conclusions reached as a consequence.

The Methodist Church in another report has considered this variety in attitudes to biblical authority and identified a range of ways in which Methodists, like other Christians, use what is written in the Bible as a source. That report '*A lamp to my feet and a light to my pathway*' (1998) identifies seven different ways in which Methodists interpret the Bible. The differences are, I think, broadly around to what extent we recognise the role of other knowledge in the interpretation of the Scriptures or believe we can interpret it directly ourselves without other help. Some parts of the Bible are mostly interpreted in what feels like a fairly straightforward, direct "literal" way for example "do not steal" is something which would seem to be easily understood in all cultures, although it might be applied differently. Other parts of the Bible take more fathoming, and we interpret them by working out (often with the help of historical cultural specialists) what the purpose behind a particular guideline was. For example, in Leviticus the injunctions against eating pigs or

seafood may have protected the health of the people of Israel at the time and certainly marked out their identity as different to those around them then but doesn't serve the same purpose in our time. So, in most Churches we don't expect this to be taken literally and ban seafood! Other parts of the Bible are written in different styles to serve a diversity of purposes and so will be interpreted in a different way. There are hymns and poems which serve to evoke feelings in us that might move us to see and love God and each other and which sometimes we simply meditate upon or sing. There are stories and parables which were deliberately surprising and challenging in their own time and which required interpretation when first shared and which we have to work even harder with in order to interpret and apply in our time.

At our service in April we noted this variety of ways of interpreting Scripture and how many of us will use different ways on different occasions and not just always stick to one way. This may be fairly easily acknowledged. However, the question then arises "what should we do when we disagree about the best or correct way to interpret the Scriptures on particular issues, and compete about correct application to how we live in practice?"

Well, I believe we can unite around the way the Scriptures point us to Jesus Christ, described in John's gospel as "the Word of God". It seems to me the main purpose of the Scriptures is to let God in Christ transform us, in order that we may be part of God's loving work of transforming the world according to God's values. In this way we become members of God's kingdom and also help to bring in that kingdom in which everyone may truly know life in all its fullness.

For me, while it is important that we all keep our integrity around different interpretations of the Scriptures, it is vital we also hold together towards these bigger goals. The kingdom of God is facing some huge challenges in our time which we would be better employed in facing in a united way rather than in arguing with one another. Specifically, belief in God is dwindling in our country, with now more people who say they are non-religious than religious (Prof Linda Woodhead, British Academy Lecture 2016). The world God made and declared "good" is in a terrible mess through violence, pollution and climate change. Our politicians cannot seem to find a way forward for our country that allows those in greatest need to be treated with dignity and have a chance of flourishing. The Bible has lots to offer to help us to be transformed as individuals through a relationship with God and then to play our part in working with God to help others and care for God's planet. It is my deep hope and prayer that those of us who gather to worship God will focus on these great challenges and put aside other differences. As Philippians 2:3-5 (New Revised Standard Version) encourages us:

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus . . ."

It would be wonderful if in our churches and communities, and in our deeply divided government and parliament, we could learn ever more how to live this part of the Bible.

I am particularly aware at the moment of the propensity for divergence within Churches as I have been the convenor of the Methodist Church's latest report on marriage and relationships. By the time you read this message that report will have been published. The United Reformed Church has already found a way of holding together around this issue and so we know it is possible! May we at Christchurch in Ilkley, on this and on any other issues of contradictory conviction hold together, better to know and serve God, for we are always stronger together.

Wishing you peace and joy
Roberta Topham