

blessings and woes

a sermon preached on the

feast of all saints

3 November 2019

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by the revd colleen clayton

the lections: Daniel 7: 1-3, 15-18; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6: 20-31

At this moment in time, there is a lot of woe being experienced regarding the subject of blessing in the Australian Anglican church!

When the Synod of the Diocese of Wangaratta met at the end of August this year, a majority voted to allow priests to bless the civil marriages of LGBTIQ+ people. The vote was taken by the clergy and the laity and was passed by 67 in favour, to 18 against. Speaking about the decision Wangaratta's Bishop, John Parkes said, "This is a long overdue recognition that if God is love, and faithful persons are living together in love, then the church ought to bless those persons in the name of God."¹

The Diocese of Sydney's Synod met in October. In his speech to the Synod, the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney said that, "God's intention for marriage has not changed. We honour him when we abide by his instruction. We cannot bless same-sex marriages for the simple reason that we cannot bless sin."²

The Synod of the Diocese of Melbourne also met in October. I would like to read to you one of the motions brought to us in that Synod. "That this Synod expresses its sorrow to the Bishop and Synod of the Diocese of Wangaratta for their approval of a liturgy that could be used to bless persons in same-sex relationships at their recent Synod meeting (August 30-31)".

This motion stirred strong feelings and deep pain amongst those on both sides of the debate. The vote was very close but, as you may have read in *The Age*, the motion expressing sorrow was passed by our Synod.

In the final chapter of this story so far, the Synod of Newcastle, meeting at the end of October, passed a Bill to amend the Clergy Discipline Ordinance to ensure that no disciplinary action could be taken against a clergy person:

- who prays a blessing for a married same-sex couple
- who declines to pray a blessing for a married same-sex couple, or
- who is married to a person of the same sex.

In speaking about this Ordinance the Bishop of Newcastle said;

Faithful Christians within the church who recognise the authority of Holy Scripture do not have a consensus view on how LGBTIQ+ people, especially LGBTIQ+ Christians, are to be engaged, embraced and supported. ... To be a Diocese that affirms comprehensive Anglicanism means that we are willing to live with the fact that there are people with whom

¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-01/same-sex-marriage-blessings-wangaratta-anglican-diocese/11468984>

² <https://sydneyanglicans.net/news/guarding-the-faith-in-a-changing-world>

we disagree. The complex question centres on which perspective should dominate what occurs in diocesan life and how we will respond graciously to conscientious difference.³

It is helpful to consider all of this in the light of today's reading from the Gospel of Luke. What does it mean to be blessed and what is the church doing when it confers, or withholds, a blessing?

In the portion of Luke's Gospel, we heard today Jesus speaks to the disciples of being blessed, meaning satisfied, unburdened, at peace. To be blessed in this way is not dependent on circumstances, it is a characteristic of living in God's realm. This makes it possible for Jesus to say, blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping, those who are hated, excluded, reviled and defamed. Although the world despises and rejects such people, they are blessed in their vulnerability because God's love and peace are with them no matter what. This is the Gospel view of what it is to be blessed.

In the Anglican tradition, ordained clergy may pronounce a blessing in many different situations. We may bless:

- the fleet at a yacht club
- a new vintage of wine
- a family's new home
- a congregation at the conclusion of a service of worship
- a battleship or submarine
- a cross, icon, stole or another devotional item
- a new baby
- an assorted bunch of animals, sometimes including proxy stuffed toys.

The act of blessing can be defined as:

- the act of consecrating, making something holy, or setting it apart for God by a prayer
- the act of sanctifying and asking God's protection for something by making the sign of the cross
- an authoritative declaration, or invocation, of divine favour.

To bless something is therefore to declare it to be a part of God's plan and in accordance with God's will and to offer it to God. This is why the Archbishop of Sydney, who believes that same sex relationships are sinful, says that they cannot be blessed. They are not, according to him, a part of God's plan and no prayer or liturgy of the church can make them so. For me this begs the question of how we understand God's will or God's plan for holiness, when a battleship, intended for war and killing, can be blessed without raising an eyebrow, but the approval of a liturgy to bless a loving, committed couple who are legally married but who happen to be of the same gender, is enough to raise the threat of schism.

It is clear from Jesus' sermon about blessing that he sees the world in a way that turns conventional values upside down. In Jesus' view of the world, God blesses the poor and the disenfranchised. It is their very vulnerability and powerlessness that make them eager, open, able, to receive God's blessing.

At the same time Jesus warns the privileged to beware. According to him, it is the things that give us a sense of having earned respectability and confidence in our relationship with God that stop us from being blessed. Religious certainty based on purity and legalism, wealth, position, comfort and privilege; it is to people who rely on these things that Jesus calls, *woe. Whoa! Stop right there! These things might make you happy in the world, but they are impediments to living in the realm of God.*

There is an implied question from Jesus' disciples about how to respond to his world changing view of life. How do we live in order that we might receive God's blessing? Jesus answers by saying, *love your*

³ <https://www.newcastleanglican.org.au/newcastle-anglicans-support-lgbtiqa-australians-uluru-statement-refugees/>

enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you (Luke 6:27-28). He then gives some practical examples of what that might look like; If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you (Luke 6:29-31).

These verses have been heard as an instruction for those at the bottom of the heap to passively accept violence, injustice and all kinds of poor treatment, trusting that they will receive God's blessing and not asking for anything more. In fact, these verses give a strong and subversive message of what assertive, non-violent love and self-respect looks like in action.

If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also. Luke's Jesus does not specify which cheek is being struck but Matthew's Jesus more helpfully identifies it as the right cheek. In first century Jewish culture the right hand was used for everything; the left hand was used solely for toilet purposes. The only way to strike someone with your right hand on their right cheek is to give them a back-handed slap. This was a sign of the greatest disrespect. So, for Jesus to tell his listeners to turn the other cheek is for him to tell them to claim the dignity of a child of God and demand to be treated with the respect due to an equal. Jesus does not tell us to strike back but he does tell us to non-violently demand to be treated as a blessed child of God, deserving of human respect.

From anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. In the Jewish culture of Jesus' time, if someone was naked because they had no clothes, the shame was not theirs but rather, it belonged to anyone who witnessed their nakedness without acting to clothe them (Gen. 9:22-23). In a poor society where most people only owned an outer and an inner garment, if someone demands your outer garment, and you give them also your only other item of clothing, you will be left naked but they will be left exposed to public shame for their greedy, unethical behaviour. Once again, it is not retaliation that Jesus calls for, but an honest revealing of injustice and abuse.

Give to everyone who begs from you. In first century Jewish culture lending was allowed, but in order to prevent debt from becoming crippling, every seventh year, the Year of Jubilee, debts were to be wiped. Human nature being what it is, this resulted in increasing meanness amongst lenders as the Year of Jubilee approached. If your debtor has six years to pay back a loan, there is a far greater chance of getting your money back than if there is only six months to go. However, Jesus says that those with money to lend should help those whose livelihoods are made tenuous by poverty. There should not be an emphasis on getting back what is given but instead on enabling someone to survive as a productive member of society.

How does all this relate to the subject of blessing and how might it help us to consider the current woe within Anglicanism?

It is clear from the Gospels and from the wider witness of all Holy Scripture, that God blesses and prioritises the poor. This does not just mean those without money, but those without power, influence, protection; those who are on the edges of society. God blesses these people, giving them dignity and value in God's sight. As the people of God, we are called to follow God's way, bringing the realm of God into being in the world, and so our priority too should be to hear the voices of the outcast and to care for them, treating them with dignity as our brothers and sisters, made in the image of God.

Of course, working out how to respond to current issues is not easy, clear cut, or without disagreements. But the Gospel calls us to approach these issues remembering that the balance between blessing and woe is not a zero-sum game. If you are blessed, that doesn't make me less blessed. God's love is inexhaustible and given with immeasurable generosity.

Disagreements are important as we seek to discern God's way, being enlightened by the insights of others rather than simply following our own preferences. But the way in which we disagree is crucial. Jesus calls us to, *do to others as you would have them do to you.* This means that our disagreements must be:

- non-retaliatory; seeking to right wrongs rather than score points against our opponents
- non-violent in word, action and intent
- based on justice
- exposing of abuse
- affirming of the dignity and blessedness of all.

We are called to be a people who live out God's justice in human flesh. That is what it means to be a Saint of God. Let us join the Communion of Saints, in the midst of this messy and broken world so that, *with the eyes of our hearts we may be enlightened and know the hope to which God has called us, the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe according to the working of God's great power* (adapted from Eph. 1:18-19). Let us make God's realm a reality, cherishing the knowledge that we are blessed, and blessing others in our turn.

The Lord be with you.