

St
Martin
in
the
Fields

Radical Compassion

The Gospel and Social Justice

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Clare Herbert
Compassion and Protest

“Both prophecy and protest make available to others the passion, the danger and the freedom of God.”

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Compassion and Protest

St Martin-in-the-Fields, 3 October 2011

I want to begin this evening's talk with two sets of words between which I feel caught.

The first words come from St John's Gospel in which Jesus is praying for his disciples movingly before leaving them.

"I pray that they may all be one. Father! May they all be in us, just as I am in you and you are in me. May they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me."

Another is found in St Matthew's Gospel and St Luke's Gospel where Jesus is warning his disciples about some of the possible effects of mission.

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the world. No, I did not come to bring peace but a sword."

In our own day the urge to live together in Christ is interpreted strikingly differently.

The writers of the recent Anglican Covenant, a vitally important document in terms of the future ordering of the life of the world wide Anglican Communion, underscores unity and harmony of agreement as important goals of our common life together.

"We affirm the ecumenical vocation of Anglicanism to the full visible unity of the Church in accordance with Christ's prayer that all may be one."

But in the Guardian the Revd Marilyn McCord Adams, appalled by what she found of how slowly things had moved for both women and lesbian and gay people in the statements of the Church of England writing when she was Regius Professor of Divinity and Canon of Christ Church, Oxford, said:

"...liberals must not make an idol of unity. In institutions, as in biology, differentiation and division may be in service of richer and more mature integration. The Jesus of St John's Gospel prays for unity, but the Jesus movement precipitated a schism within Judaism. It was not his first choice, but it is how the Gospel spread"

As an Anglican priest and practicing lesbian I feel squeezed by the pressure of trying to work out which set of these words to live by and how, and by the possibility of whether it is possible to live by all of them at the same time! As a true Anglican I want to live the former, to join around one altar in all difference and harmony, to make the Anglican Communion work! As a lesbian priest and particularly as a lesbian pastor I want to protest. It is because I struggle with that tension that I am here tonight. Thank you for helping me to explore it.

A fortnight ago Nicholas Sagovsky set the scene for our series of lectures on Radical Compassion with a talk of rare clarity, authority and grace. I want to build on four aspects of what he said:

1. **God is radically compassionate towards the human race** and we are to turn the world upside down by imitating the radical compassion so alive in his Son.
2. Radical compassion involves cost to the self: **anyone who is in attentive engagement with the other who suffers, suffers also.**
3. **Working at what needs to be changed to end the suffering of the other involves attempts at creating justice**, the formation of networks of right relations between ourselves and others, as well as between ourselves and God.
4. **The Church, therefore, because it sings the song of Mary's Magnificat, possesses as a primary goal the creation of active citizens** who are intent on creating justice in society rather than turned in upon themselves and on issues of church leadership and hierarchy.

I agree with all of this but want to suggest that the four above sets up well nigh insuperable tensions for Gay and Lesbian Christians which may result in legitimate and just protest.

In order for you to be able to understand what I mean I would like you to do the following exercise.

On the sheet of paper in front of you I would like you to read the series of steps and statements written with regard to Gay and Lesbian people by Church and State over the last 50 years. Then I would like you to turn to your neighbour and say simply what strikes you.

When people ask me "Why do Lesbian and Gay people go on so much about who they are? Wasn't it better for all of us in the old days when they didn't say anything?" I reply, we are not in the old days! The reality I know is that as the state becomes increasingly tolerant towards gay and lesbian people, providing legislation which allows us to live in less fear, in more rejoicing, and with increasingly regularised family ties and responsibilities made clear, as the Civil Partnerships Legislation has done as has Equality of Access to Goods and Services - so the relative intolerance of the Church of England becomes harder to bear. That tension leads of course to human suffering and pain, and to very many gay and lesbian people saying, "why bother with the church?"

How best to live compassionately with that pain? I want to suggest two positions to take up – that of waiting for justice and that of working for justice.

Waiting

Waiting for the revelation of God's mercy, in Exodus, in Exile, in prayer, in steady daily attendance upon God's grace to deliver, in expectation of the End Time has been a constant theme in Hebrew and Christian theology from their very beginning. Two very good books to read about it are *The Meaning is in the Waiting*, by Paula Gooder, and *The Stature of Waiting*, by William Vanstone. One of our most important modern theologians who writes from the perspective of being a gay man in the Catholic Church is James Alison and he also recommends waiting for justice to prevail as an important stance for gay and lesbian Christians to consider. His perspective is of it being essential for us not to waste time on the furious activity of putting down our enemy in the quest for revenge. In all his writings he is hyper alert to the human tendency to make of those who oppose us scapegoats and warns gay and lesbian Christians against doing this.

He said in a lecture on this very platform called *The Divided Self*,

“The more attention I give to that person or group being wicked, and not like me, the more I allow myself to be fascinated by the evil of that person I then give that person or group permission to dance around inside me, outside my control.”

He urges that we are within God's own End Game in relation to gay acceptance in Church and Society but that “the process of adjustment to truth in this sphere is going to take a long, long time.” He challenges us:

“Do we dare to have our love stretched by building (the church) without approval, as we wait longingly for the day when some... wall comes down...Can you take responsibility for that? Can you persevere?” (Lambeth Conference) (Building a Church outside the walls).

Waiting for acceptance can be for many reasons. The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lambeth Conference would advise such waiting as the developing world deeply needs the support of the Western Church yet cannot tolerate our sexual mores. Some may wait in celibacy or silence because they are fully given to other causes of justice or ways of life in which open gay protest would hinder fragile and important relationships. Still others because family or friendship relationships are not ready for truth telling and may never be. And here it's important to remember God's time goes on past this flesh bit.

It is important to honour waiting for God's mercy to be fully revealed as a vital and important Christian witness. But it's important too tonight because we are looking at the pressures which lead to protest to fully acknowledge the dangers in this position.

The main danger is the ease with which it may cover collusion with fear – fear of who one is so that one never allows oneself to develop fully, not out of freedom but out of constraint and there is all the difference. For the one unable to be compassionate towards the self is rarely compassionate towards others – the person waiting for the revelation of who they are may painfully confuse others, may act bitterly or spitefully towards those who see more free, and of course are also likely to be blind towards the massive injustices cause by homophobia here and across the world. The one waiting may also not in reality be able to contain that waiting but turn to all sorts of abusive forms of deviant behaviour in an effort to over control self and others. One of the things I am desperate to get the Church hierarchy to own is the need to look at how much deviant sexual behaviour among gay people, including gay clergy, happens because the outlets are not there to be open and true and freely express who one is.

Facing the tensions of now - waiting for Justice to be revealed. As a theologically, psychologically and pastorally mature stance which sets the self free for disciplined service and generous joy it is admirable though may not be open to all to thrive on, or enjoy. This stance may certainly be understood as its own compassionate protest against an unthinking gay world which equates “being out” at all costs with goodness.

Working for justice

There are all sorts of ways of working for justice for gay and lesbian people whether Christian or not and the need to do so seems hardly worth arguing about, or does it? Last time, just before the end of his lecture Nicholas slipped in a line which astonished me – he seemed to suggest that if the Church were to spend less time arguing over issues of gender and sexual identity and more time over seemingly more important issues like justice then those former issues would simply and somehow shuffle down into a just shape. What worried me was not, “did I get it wrong?” I get loads wrong and don't worry about it. What worried me was if it was possible for me to get this wrong then it was possible for others to mishear too, and for the age old message to be perpetrated by a quite evidently lovely person that issues of gender and sexual identity are somehow less important to pursue.

For me this is a dangerous line to take for three reasons.

- What I have experienced at the heart of gay oppression in the church is my NOT being taken seriously as a full person – being objectivised, talked about and treated as an object whom it is possible to pass judgements and opinions over as if those judgements and opinions did not hurt or injure me. And the reason I work for justice for gay and lesbian Christians is because I consider that it is this objectivisation of people – not coming alongside them as people with attention engaged, not giving them the attention of compassion - which lies at the heart of all injustice – the depersonalising of the other so that it becomes easy to hurt and oppress them, and to support the climate in which they may be violated, even murdered. The Samaritan was a neighbour because he saw and understood pain and need and did not detach himself from it leaving a person to die as an object in the ditch.
- A further evil which may then take place and which certainly happened to me is that lesbian and gay people may internalise this oppression, may hate themselves, do themselves harm, try to detach their own gay identity from the very core of themselves. I suffered from this phenomenon dreadfully when I first came out. I was in my middle thirties and there was no hiding my sexual orientation any more because I had – at last I might add - met someone worth loving for the rest of my life. I was beset by phobia and fears and a sort of mental illness which made even going outdoors terrifying for a while. I had a good life – what I couldn't do was allow myself to have it, see myself as good. Told often enough that we are sinful, or that we should keep quiet, or that we are causing disunity in the Church eventually many of us internalise profound shame, a shame which saps confidence, cripples joy, and may lead to the reinforcement of mental illness, to despair, to hiding frightened in inauthentic relationships, even to suicide.

- Then, in contrast to Nicholas' apparent stance, I have been heavily involved in the sheer slog of getting women into the priesthood and - please God - this year through General Synod into the Episcopate on equal terms with men. I have no sense at all that we would be where we are now if it were not for the dedicated work of the Movement for the Ordination of Women and now of WATCH, the daughter organisation "Women and the Church". Involved in those campaigns I was confronted with the truth of how hard we had to work when two friends of the Movement - the then Bishops of Durham and Lincoln, both speaking on the MOW platform openly said how much we had to do to get through the fiercely supportive and protective ring of the House of Bishops - they were quite clear that despite seeing us to be on the side of right, their first tendency as men and male bishops would be to protect men they had gone to school, university, London Club and now the House of Bishops with no question. It was a shocking but utterly helpful insight to gain into the dangers of sitting back. It is in this sense of understanding and having gratitude for those who go before us in the struggle for justice that James Alison suggests we claim our present freedoms because of their work - "We stand on others' shoulders."

So what work is going on?

Recently the main LGBT Christian charities have come together in the Anglican Church in a new way as the LGBT Anglican Coalition and we are lobbying for change, particularly over the blessing of same sex relationships and the care of LGBT Ordinands; we are creating liturgy resources; we are educating for openness in terms of struggling to listen to the others who disagree with us; we are trying to get the voices of LGBT people in the developing world heard. One important thrust of this work is simply by our meetings to offer role models of being Christian and lesbian, Christian and gay. The worlds of Gay Pride, Old Compton Street, the Scene both for men and for women can offer images of the gay life which Christians want to challenge. Much of our work lies in simply being and proclaiming with our lives it is possible to be gay and longing to be recreated in the image of Christ in our personal, partnership and social lives. My own doctoral research work lies in what constitutes good pastoral care for lesbian and gay Christians who are in any sort of developmental transition. So watch this space and look up LGBT AC on the web.

But to enter the second part of this lecture I want to look now at what I take to be one particular form of working for justice which is protest in the narrowest sense of the word, speaking out, shouting out, acting out, using our bodies to speak our hearts and minds.

Saying Ouch audibly in Church when all parents are presented as necessarily warm and accepting towards their children when that is NOT the experience of all gay and lesbian people by a long chalk and over parentalised images of God really don't help.

Waving banners and singing hymns at Gay Pride.

Marching for gays to be able to be accepted as adopters.

I have a hunch that it's this sort of work which people feel slightly out of line with being Christian, slightly egotistical and not understanding of the pain of others, slightly divisive, unnecessary, coarse even. Where does protest fit in the Christian tradition? And is it compatible with compassion?

I understand protest in this narrow sense as being on a continuum in lesbian and gay experience with three things:

- Saying, Voicing, Speeching who we are - Coming Out if you like.
- Conversation with God, having Chutzpah, having it out with God about who we are.
- Prophecy, envisioning God's future for us.

When I walked my first Gay Pride March - joined friends very shyly and nervously here on the steps of St Martin's - I was so nervous and so proud! Gradually along the way I enjoyed singing, blowing my whistle, dancing alongside outrageous cross dressers and acknowledging all our common identity - I became less afraid of myself and my common humanity with others and it was like Coming Out, especially when we rounded Piccadilly and the crowd on the roof of St James Piccadilly who knew me started to wave and cheer knowing as they did what this might be costing. I was with friends. Knowing myself to be with friends not on the pavement but walking the walk was a form of coming out.

No-one ever wants one to come out nor is it ever easy to do so, to admit one belongs to a minority, but it is part of establishing identity - I am NOT like that, I am like this, with these people I am specially at home! Hilary Mantel in her autobiography Giving Up the Ghost is not writing about being gay but after a catholic childhood, in which nobody at all much listened to her, the experience of finding out who she was is not dissimilar.

"When you were a child you had to create yourself from whatever was to hand. You had to construct yourself and make yourself into a person, fitting somehow into the niche that in your family has always been vacant, or into a vacancy left by someone dead."

The niche most of us had to fit into for the long years of growing up was heterosexual, so no wonder Coming Out has the force of protest attached to it. It's particularly difficult for the Christian to come out in my view because the Church is so ill at ease with the body, let alone with things sexual to do with the body - again Mantel writes rather mischievously and endearingly:

"In terms of the catholic Church, the church in which I was brought up, the body is a beast, a base simian relative that turns up at the door of the spirit too often for comfort; a bawling uncle, drunk, who raps with the door knocker and sings in the street. Saints starve. They diet till they see visions...Some saints are muscular Christians. But there are no fat saints" (no gay ones either for similar reasons as far as I can tell)

Anyone who has listened even recently to certain Bishops of the Anglican Communion justifying violence against practicing homosexuals and the language such complainants use about the body will understand how for the Christian to come out at all is a brave step of protest.

But protest is also in a continuum with conversation with God and with prophecy arising from that conversation.

Chuntering, grumbling cheeky conversation, Chutzpah with God in which we establish who we are and who God is has always been a lively part of the Hebraic religious tradition. Anyone who has seen the play or film Fiddler on the Roof will have found themselves attracted to the way the main protagonist protests to God continually about the hand he has been dealt - if I were a rich man is the least of it! This

chuntering protest we see more seriously reflected in Moses misery before God over his shyness, Jeremiah's about his youthful inadequacy to be a prophet, let alone Job about his personal pain. And lest we forget the women of the tradition – Sarah's laughter at the idea of future fertility and Hannah's long lament before God over childlessness are connected with this – here I am being human as you made me, and it hurts, and I just hope that YOU are noticing! We could do with recovering the force of Chutzpah.

Jesus is, unfortunately for us, not given humorous lines but he certainly spends time differentiating himself from what is expected! Didn't you know I would be in the Temple? It's not time yet for me to be creating miracles with wine! Get behind me! Get out of the House of God. Please may I let this cup pass from me?

Then, by the time we reach Paul let alone the early fathers of the Church we arrive at a culture more heavily influenced by neo-platonism than were the Hebrew prophets, in which strong emotions like anger and fear, desire and admiration are to be more tightly controlled so that we have lost our confidence in growing into chutzpah, grumbling before God.

With confident conversation about who we are we move further into the continuum between prophecy and protest. Both prophecy and protest make available to others the passion, the danger and the freedom of God.

Walter Brueggeman in his beautiful book *Hopeful Imagination*, about the prophetic voices of Exile – of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and 2nd Isaiah suggests how there is a phrase in Isaiah Chapter 43, verses 18 – 19 which acts like a hinge in Israel's history, a hinge in our own story of faith, a hinge in the developing history of the Church:

Do not remember former things
Behold, I am making a new thing

He suggests if we are to follow these prophets, "we need to learn to articulate a newness out of our own tradition but speaking a newness out beyond the purview of most of our present contemporaries." And I find this a very helpful encouragement when I think about the act of protest. The protest, trust and courage of the prophets were based not on egotism but in their knowledge of and dependence upon the ways God had worked and was working. The protest, trust and courage of Jesus and the saints of the Church have also been so based in who God is – one who leads us out to live with justice and compassion. Prophecy – discerning the ways we understand God and acting and speaking of it – links our protest with compassion for we have responsibility for others who are in pain. **We need by our protest to speak to them a word of hope! Protest in itself may be fuelled by compassion for those whose lives are blighted by oppression, by bullying, by death threats, by the terror of torture and execution, by simple fear.**

When gay and lesbian Christians protest – at General Synod, at the Lambeth Conference, celebrating the Pride march here in prayer and word and song we bring about the new actions of God by the way we treat each other, welcome each other, and challenge each other, by the ways we see God and worship, by the ways we talk about God and listen – in prophetic protest we bring about the new actions of God just for a few moments in our lives by the use of our imagination to conjure the longed for future for ourselves and on behalf of others. Protest for us, as for other Christians throughout church history suffering the hiding of God beneath cruel human shapes, may be prophetic and an act of compassion.

But what about when others disagree – strongly disagree? What about their right to be, and their hurt at our loud proclamation of who we are? Isn't that the crunch issue in the Church of England at the moment?

I think and think and think about this one and this is where I am right now. Those who disagree with me must have the right to say what they think, to exist without fear of violence or retribution, as must I. But the extent of that right ends when their opinion causes others to suffer greatly and fuels even unconsciously the fires of violence and hate. I consider conservative views about homosexual practice to be based on fear caused by taboos created in speech and then in liturgy and then in written texts in vastly different societies than our own some 2 – 3000 years ago where there was no understanding of homosexuality as an orientation nor of its capacity for goodness and faithfulness in terms of relating. As a Christian pastor attending to the needs of LG people or their parents or friends I know that the costs of living under such taboos are far too great for me to be happy with the calm of those who disagree with me. The cost of perpetuating taboo on this subject is often somebody's else's wellbeing and sometimes and increasingly across the world somebody else's life. That price is too high for me not to put myself on the line in protest, and I do this as an outcome of the call to be pastoral not as an act of aggression.

If that is the positive side of protest wherein lies its danger?

- We must not depersonalise in our turn those who disagree with us. We are trying to attend to God's kingdom of kindness, justice and compassion and not only to our own ends. Like the people of Israel who so easily forgot the pain of oppression in Egypt in their triumph at having a land of their own we need to beware the tendency to simply recreate oppressions with our own views and desires. Having known what it is to be outside the establishment of society and Church Christians who are Gay and Lesbian are called to heed the outside experiences of others, the outside parts of our world – to let our own experience speak so as to save, to grow IN compassion as a result of what we have experienced in being oppressed ourselves.
- We need to learn to repent and mourn ourselves. I am very struck how in learning from Walter Brueggeman about Israel's prophets when they protested they did so to the people as well as on behalf of the people. The people themselves were to enter into the acceptance of exile, understand their own role in their oppression, fully, before being able to be led out. And I sometimes feel that we Christian gay and lesbian activists such as I represent become raucous in wanting everything now when we have not accepted how much work we may need to do towards repentance: in the ways we relate, listen and present ourselves to a taboo trapped church; in the work we may need to do in distinguishing between freedom of sexual identity in Christ and barely disguised promiscuity; in the efforts we may need to make to relinquish the identity of victim in our lives so that we are freed up in our energy to work alongside others who are even more in need.
- -And if we will protest we must learn to bear the consequences. If we are being called to witness the conflict between God with God's Church over the issue of the responsible use of human sexuality, it will probably prove not too comfortable a place to be!

I want to end with more words from McCord Adams. What does compassion mean when protest is unavoidably necessary? She writes:

"Getting along to get along" is not the Gospel. The synoptic gospels virtually guarantee: because the reign of God stands in judgement over any and every human social system, its coming by successive approximations is sure to violate our socially constructed identities repeatedly. Our part is to discern for all we're worth, and to live up to the light that is in us."

For some of us that will involve protest.