

20th May 2012 – Easter VI
Jn 17: 11b-19, Acts 1: 15-17 & 21-26, Ps 108, Jer 10: 1-10a
07:30 & 09:30 Grahamstown Cathedral

Claudia: Hey Andy, you're looking a bit bleak... what's up?

Andy: Hey Claudia... Ja, it's been a tough week.

CC: Do you want to talk about it?

AK: That might help, sit down, do you want some coffee?

CC: Coffee would be great, so what's made your week so difficult?

AK: I have had the most hectic pastoral situations to deal with. On Tuesday morning Brian came in to see me, you know Brian, young guy, very keen on sport. He played first team for St. Andrews last year. Well, he told his family that he is gay, and his father threw him out the house, told him he didn't want to see him until he came to his senses. Brian was a mess, you can imagine after being rejected by his father that way. His father also told him that God sends homosexuals to hell. We spoke a bit about God's love and he is in a slightly better place now, but still alienated from his family.

CC: Wow, that is hectic!

AK: Just wait, it gets worse. I saw Brian's father that evening. He stormed into my office and demanded that I 'fix' his son. He had a lot to say about how lukewarm the church has become. He needs someone to blame and I became his punching bag. I assured him that the Anglican Church of Southern Africa had not got to the point of blessing homosexual relationships, but I also told him that the church did not regard homosexual orientation as a sin. Well, that silly of me... red rag to a bull! Sometimes I don't even know what I think... do you think homosexuality is a sin?

CC: Well, it's interesting that you ask because we have just had a three day workshop on this issue at the College of the Transfiguration. I had the opportunity to look again at the key biblical texts alluding to the issue of homosexuality. I was reminded again that the issue is mostly about the way in which Christians read and interpret the Bible. Too many Christians treat the Bible as a buffet, pick the things they already approve of and merely pass over the bits they don't like. For example, the Leviticus text that fundamentalists love to quote: "It is an abomination for a man to lie with another man as with a woman." A similar text in Leviticus asserts that such people should be put to death. I doubt that anybody reasonable, who is opposed to homosexuality, would advocate stoning a person in a same sex relationship. I have become more and more convinced that the books of the Bible need to be interpreted with great care, a simple literal interpretation of these ancient texts is not helpful.

AK: Ja, you're right and there's a lot of literature on these issues. Did you know that our Synod of Bishops has released a document called: Pastoral Guidelines in Response to Civil Unions within the wider Contexts of Marriage and Human Sexuality?

CC: Yes, but only because of the workshop... the Church is really good at hiding those sorts of documents!

AK: The only reason that I know about it is because on Thursday I had Zandile in my office with her partner.

CC: When you say partner...?

AK: She is a lesbian and more than that, she has already gone the civil union route. She came to ask me if there was some way that I could bless her civil union. I didn't know what to say.

CC: This is the same Zandile who is on the core team for the cathedral student ministry and helps lead Bible study right?

- AK: The very same, one of the most committed Christians at the cathedral! It broke my heart to say to her that there was nothing the church could do for her at the moment. But what can I do, I will lose my licence if I were to offer any kind of blessing service. I prayed for her and her partner, but I could see her disappointment and her deep longing for the church to accept her relationship as legitimate.
- CC: Does the rest of the congregation know, I mean there may be some who would be angered if they knew a homosexual person were involved in leadership?
- AK: That's the worst part of it all. I tried to reassure her of Christ's love for her and her partner. But I asked her to keep the relationship quiet... goodness only knows what a person like Brian's dad would do if he got wind of this... he has already threatened to leave the church if we don't start 'preaching the truth' as he calls it.
- CC: I cannot fathom how a father can just cut off his son like that, and I know of others who have experienced the same thing. Does Zandile's mother know about all this?
- AK: Yes she does, she came to see me on Friday.
- CC: Really! You really have had a tough pastoral week.
- AK: I told you! So Ma Khoza comes in and I can see she is in pain. It took nearly a full half an hour for her to tell me about Zandile's same sex union, she didn't know that I'd seen Zandile the day before. She loves her daughter and has really tried to be supportive but she is desperate that her child may be destined for eternal punishment.
- CC: Did you talk to Ma Khoza about the difference between a committed lifelong homosexual union as a legitimate moral expression, I mean this is not someone who is jumping in and out of bed with several different sexual partners.

- AK: We did and Ma Khoza understands some of that but at one point she said: “You know Father, the church has said for so long that this is wrong, how can I just come to accept it overnight?”
- CC: You know, the people you have dealt with this week are like a microcosm of the wider Anglican Church, the Anglican Communion. When the Episcopal Church in America elected Gene Robinson as Bishop, the more conservative parts of the communion were outraged. Since then it has been very difficult to bring the Anglican Church of the global south together with the American and Canadian Anglicans. Rowan Williams and his advisers came up with the idea of an Anglican Communion Covenant. The Anglican Church of Southern Africa has agreed in principle to the Covenant, but the Church of England seems to have dismissed the idea. There still seem to be very different ideas across the Communion and the threat of the Church being torn in two over this issue is very real.
- AK: The possibility of the Anglican Communion being torn in two is a dreadful thought. The Gospel Reading for Sunday is part of Jesus’ high priestly Prayer. The last verse of that text has refused to leave my mind during this week... Jesus prays to the Father; “keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.” We echo that in our prayers when we pray that all Christian people may be united in the truth, and live together in God’s love. But how on earth will Anglicans all over the globe be able to agree in the truth when it comes to this issue, the church is between a rock and a hard place!
- CC: It would be a whole lot easier if we could just cast lots... role a dice as it were and let God tell us what to do.

AK: It's funny you say that, because the New Testament reading is from Acts and is about the choosing of a replacement Apostle for Judas. They had to choose between Matthias and Justus. Apparently they prayed and then cast lots. All the commentators go out of their way to point out that lots were never used again for decision making as they went on to receive the Holy Spirit who is to guide us. I have always found it a little odd that Jesus didn't choose another Apostle before his Ascension, if it was so important, surely he would have? Why were they so desperate to have twelve?

CC: Maybe it was a mistake... the churches first mistake of many! I mean we don't hear anything more about Matthias after his being chosen. Yet, St. Paul and his influence is writ boldly in the history of our faith. Perhaps the Disciples were too impatient... If they had waited, it may have become clear to them that God had chosen Paul as the 12th Apostle. I think that the covenant was partly an attempt to 'buy time' and avoid a rushed decision, to give Christians with different perspectives time to prayerfully discern the will of God regarding this issue.

AK: Ja, I think you're right. I wonder if this won't go the same way as remarriage of divorced people and the ordination of women? Though homosexuality is not quite the same is it?

CC: No, it's not, but perhaps the church could apply some of the same principles it employed for those issues. Remember how the ordination of women was dealt with... each diocese was given the choice as to how to proceed. Perhaps we go that route, the local option route which will allow different parts of the communion to adopt a stance of their choice.

AK: That doesn't help homosexuals in Nigeria or conservatives in America.

CC: No, but it might be the only way to hold the church together.

AK: Perhaps we should follow the wisdom of Cardinal John Henry Newman, who put forward the idea of the primacy of individual conscience. Basically stated, it is the belief that if, having applied our reason as best we can, and we decide that a certain action is right for us, it is our duty to follow our conscience. Roman Catholic couples frequently revert to this concept when it comes using contraception officially forbidden by their church. Of course Brian's father would not be satisfied with this.

CC: And Zandile would be disappointed if we said in essence: "We think what you are doing is wrong, but we accept your right to follow your conscience."

AK: There don't seem to be any easy answers do there... perhaps we should pray.

CC: Lord God, Grant us the serenity to accept the things which should not change, courage to change the things that should change and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.