

Parish Priest's Report 2004

As you know, I set out tomorrow for New Zealand. My excuse for going is that the Anglican Communion is in crisis. The Diocese of Christchurch has a special one day synod on Saturday 19th June, arranged to encourage open discussion and debate, particularly on contentious matters of human sexuality. The night before, I am to preach at an Inclusive Eucharist at St Luke's-in-the-City, where this forthcoming special synod will be the focus of our intercession. Now I do not for one delusional moment imagine that the problems of the Anglican world can be solved by my own little efforts. On the other hand, however, I am quite certain that every little contribution helps toward reducing the tensions between us and reconciling our differences. This is simply a matter of conviction, something I know in love as a gift of faith. Some, of course, will say this in itself is delusional, so I want to explain why I believe and trust that this faith conviction is real.

Before I do so, however, allow me to say just a brief word about the presenting issue: our human sexuality. In doing so, we need to take care. Already, I have spoken of the "matter" or "issue" of sexuality. This language suggests that we are engaged in a rational discussion about conflicting theories. It is, however, obvious to us all that there is nothing very rational and certainly nothing theoretical about sexuality. Always, we need to stop in our tracks and remember that we are talking about people with faces and names, sisters and brothers with similar desires and fears, companions with dreams we dare not trample underfoot.

Treading carefully, then, we might do worse than begin by noting how something radically new is happening in the world. This new reality is that we are beginning to see that some people are simply heterosexual while others are simply homosexual. Until quite recently, the prevailing view saw heterosexuality as normal and normative, while some unfortunately or mischievously choose to deviate from this norm. Not so long ago we talked of sexual preference, whereas now we more accurately talk of sexual orientation. Preference, after all, implies freedom of choice. Orientation is not a matter of choosing. Or, better, it is not a matter of our choosing. Orientation means something is already chosen for us. Now, regardless of whether or not we are comfortable with this new reality, sexual orientation happens to be a matter of fact which is not open to change. Straight and gay people are suddenly saying "I am", acknowledging who they are as straight or gay individuals and refusing to hide any longer. This means that being gay is not something special or exceptional. Indeed, it is a very ordinary fact of life, rather like rain, or tides, or left-handedness, something which in itself is morally neutral.^[i] This dawning anthropological truth means that we are all in the painful but delightful process of learning something new about who we are that we didn't know before. This may not sound to most of us like rocket science, but in fact it is. It is novel and explosive, which explains why we are currently struggling to hold together.

These stresses and strains are, quite naturally, reflected in the common life of the entire spectrum of faith communities. Churches, synagogues, mosques and temples all around the world are all struggling today with the same issues. Adaptation to contemporary social trends is even more acute among those who live by ancient wisdom. Faithfulness to past revelation is always in danger of becoming obscurantism. Meanwhile, God may be doing a new thing, inviting us into a future we have not previously imagined. Theologian James Alison draws on the biblical image of God's kingdom as a wedding banquet, likening church life to being at a great party. He speaks somewhat self-consciously as a Roman Catholic, but what he says certainly translates across religious frontiers.

"I'd like to say that for me being Catholic is being at a huge and very spacious party at which there are an awful lot of people, most of whom are not at all like me and with whom I don't have much in common. Furthermore this is a party to which I have been invited not because I'm special, or any of the other people are special, but because the host invited me, part of his little joke, a joke whose full sense isn't yet clear to me".

"One of the things about this party is that quite a lot of us spend quite a lot of time trying to work out who should be at the party and who shouldn't, even when the evidence is that the host is pretty promiscuous in his invitations. Right now we're faced with the growing possibility that a bunch of people who it has long been agreed by almost everybody shouldn't be at the party can take off their masks and be at the party as themselves. And this means facing up to the possibility that a lot of us have been very cruel and nasty to a lot of people over a long time, thinking ourselves quite right to be so. Well, here's where we are at: there is a fundamental disagreement about an issue of truth. Either the host does welcome gay people into his party, or the host does not. Now, let me be quite clear: it is one or other of these possibilities. One or other side is deceived."[\[ii\]](#)

Now I don't need to tell you that I am definitely among those who see this new reality as an outworking of the gospel among us. I am convinced that what we are experiencing is God moving us into a deeper humanity, and we don't like being in the birth canal one little bit! I will happily argue this case to the very best of my ability in any company. In the end, however, the real issue is not whether I am right or wrong about this. The fire and light show currently sparked by human sexuality is only one symptom of our contemporary disease – and I do mean dis-ease. It may well be that I am right. Alternatively, others may be right. This being so, the real question has to be how do we treat each other while we disagree?

The catholicity of the church is all about living out in local Christian communities the radical and spacious hospitality of God, the creator of all the astonishing diversity we are gradually uncovering. Whenever we discover the way to live out the divine hospitality gracefully, something of the reality of the living God is embodied and the incarnation. When we join Mary in saying yes to God with all our heart there is a new release of God's presence and power in the human world. As we make room for each other there is more room for God, because the usual obstacles to God's work, in self-preoccupation and fear and resentment, have been overcome in Mary's unswerving willingness to absorb the vision God has given. As we imitate this pattern the eternal Word lives in us, speaking and acting in love to others. In the Archbishop of Canterbury's words, "Only so are we 'magnified', given our full dignity and splendour – not by rushing around in panic defending ourselves and standing on our dignity, but by being still enough to reflect and absorb the light flowing from God the Holy Trinity, something so wonderful that it can put into perspective the fears and pettinesses that we think are real life, and silence us for a moment, letting true life in"[\[iii\]](#)

There could hardly be a more appropriate day for us to reflect on who we are as church than this feast of Corpus Christi. Corpus Christi restates some of James Alison's insights in its own distinctive sacramental key. The body of Christ crucified and risen is now on the altar and around the altar.[\[iv\]](#) We are the body of Christ, we who together receive the body of Christ. This altar-table has four equal sides and no specially favoured guests. The four-sided table speaks of north, south, east and west, the wide world from which the people of God come to dine in the kingdom.[\[v\]](#) In other words, regardless of who we are there is a place set for each one of us at the eucharistic feast which no one else can occupy. Here there are no surrogates. Christ the host invites me as myself and you as yourself, and the celebration remains impoverished and incomplete until everyone responds with love to his lavish generosity. The company is, to say

the least of it, a very mixed bag indeed, and I may not care at all for the person next to me. But it is not for me to go over the guest list and rescind some invitations. Church, by definition, is not a body of the like-minded. Church is not a lot of people who have something in common called Christian faith who get together to share it with each other and communicate it to other people outside. Church is first of all a kind of space cleared by God through Jesus in which people may become what God made them to be (God's sons and daughters), and what we have to do about the church is not first to organize it as a society but to inhabit it as a climate or a landscape. It is a place where we can see properly – God, God's creation, ourselves. It is a place or dimension in the universe that is in some way growing towards being the universe itself in restored relation to God. It is a place we are invited to enter, the place occupied by Christ, who is himself the climate and atmosphere of a renewed universe.[\[vi\]](#)

Inhabiting Christ's place and seeing properly means knowing why Christian unity is never established while there are outcasts and scapegoats. Church is about expanding the language of love, not restricting it. And this means dealing with one another carefully and prayerfully, respectfully and courteously, arguing our case with passion while never, ever stooping to personal attack or character assassination. Listen again to James Alison – "Given that none of us is the host, and given that all of us are in this by accident, have been invited thanks to the generosity of someone else, isn't the real issue NOT the question of who is right or wrong, but rather how we talk to each other in the interval while we wait for the host to make it clear? What runs the risk of destroying the party is much more how we talk to and about each other than it is what conclusions we reach. And this is for the obvious reason that the conclusions we reach are entirely dependent on how we talk."

"If what I am saying is true then it is a fundamental theological point in this discussion that it is not how I defend my own, but how I imagine, portray, and engage with my adversary which is the only really important issue at hand. It may even be important to lose the argument, as only the really serene and confident can, if that is the only way to win him over. After all, our example is One who was happy to be counted among the transgressors so as to get across the power of God and the wisdom of God to those who couldn't understand it. It means that I am always going to have to be in communion with fundamentalists as a condition for staying at the party. Any tendencies I might have to belong to a group of people like me, who think like me, agree with me, and with whom I could form a nice friendly like-minded clique, are constantly being smashed."

There's a book just published by Hilary Wilson about her experience of living in a number of communities of people with serious learning difficulties. It's called *My Life Together* – a title which already tells us quite a lot. But in the course of it she summarises the path to Christian unity by adapting what another writer says about Christian prayer: we need to learn the three R's – Relate, Relinquish, Receive.

"One of the most moving stories in the book is the testimony of a mother describing what it was like to come to terms with having a brain-damaged daughter – the shattering of expectations first, and the learning to live from day to day; then the unexpected relations made possible by the new challenge, the contacts with people you'd never otherwise meet; then the discovery of the reality and beauty of the child, growing into an adult, giving the parent what could not have been predicted. Gradually the fear of 'who'll look after her when we're gone?' is overcome as a whole world of fresh relations opens up. And the final normality of the mother learning to be a friend to this child who had seemed destined to be in profound ways a stranger. Relate, relinquish, receive: two lives 'magnified' as there is a slow absorption of the difficult reality that is also compellingly beautiful; dignity discovered and celebrated."[\[vii\]](#)

Relate – be in the company of God and God’s friends to be reminded of what faith is.

Relinquish – let go of what stops you being human, fear and prejudice and the longing to be known to be always in the right.

Receive – welcome with gratitude and reverence what God gives you through each other, through friend and stranger.

If we can live this out here together, we will be a true sign of God’s hope in a troubled world and a timid church.

In New Zealand this coming week I expect to be doing what I try always to do: encouraging a particular part of our extensive family simply to be who God calls us to be, a people freshly animated by the wind and fire of God’s Spirit, relating, relinquishing, and receiving.

On the home front the Black Swan Theatre Company is working hard “to create theatre that changes lives and brings people together in a shared moment of understanding”. In Christ, this is surely our ambition too, for such incandescent moments change the world.

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Parish Priest

Corpus Christi

Sunday 13th June 2004

^[i] See James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (London: DLT 2001),

and *On Being Liked* (London: DLT 2003).

^[ii] James Alison, “Human Sexuality or Ecclesial Discourse?”, *Sarum Consultation on Human Sexuality and the Churches*, 9th-10th February 2004.

^[iii] Rowan Williams, *National Pilgrimage Sermon, Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, Monday 31st May 2004*.

^[iv] Peter Carnley, *Reflections in Glass* (Sydney: HarperCollins 2004) p. 119.

^[v] Rowan Williams, “The Christian Priest Today”, *Lecture at Ripon College, Cuddesdon, Oxford, Friday 28th May 2004*, p. 2.

^[vi] Rowan Williams, *National Pilgrimage Sermon, 31st May 2004*.