

Jun 9th - Inclusive Church - Living with difference, disagreeing well.

Romans 14: 1-12

Matthew 7: 1-6

We've been looking at Inclusivity, and since Easter looking at sexuality and gender. And we've seen what its like in the world, over here, and what its like in the church over here. And we've thought about how the church decides or thinks about these things - using scripture, tradition and reason.

We've seen how it is totally legitimate to read the bible and see it prohibiting homosexuality.

We've also seen that its totally legitimate to read the bible and come to the opposite conclusion.

In tradition we've seen how the position has been against homosexuality for a long time, but also that tradition is not keeping everything the same, it is dynamic, and has changed about circumcision, gentiles, women, the slave trade and much more.

And we've looked at reason and seen how it is a combination of wisdom, experience, and helps us to interpret the tradition and Scripture - and how Jesus used reason in one way, while the Pharisees used it in another.

And we are still not clear. And this is why the church has been struggling with this issue for decades.

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In fact, when I started and said the world is here, and the church is here, I oversimplified. The world is not all unanimous over here, and the church is not unanimous over here. This is not either, or, black and white - its a lot of grey.

Given that we're not all going to agree, what we're going to look at today is how we live with difference, or how we disagree well.

Cross your arms

Cross them the wrong way

Its uncomfortable to do things differently

We have ways of being comfortable - difference feels odd

Some people like different foods or different people - but even they will have things that they cannot accept, or ... we all have boundaries, limits.

Interesting that some differences are fine - you like lamb, you like pork - and we don't get upset or cross, or argue! But other things are more important.

If your friend says - well of course I'm racist, you might say - ooh, I don't think that's ok!

There might be a line where you say - we can't be friends, or that's too uncomfortable, I can't just agree to disagree.

We have lots of differences, and some of those differences seem more important to us than others, and we don't know what things are important for other people.

You might say - would you like a drink? and its no problem for you, but for that other person, you don't know what they grew up with or how alcohol ruined their life. So its way more important for them - its an important difference.

For some people Brexit was important, but not for all.

As we do inclusive church - some people will have no problem with disability or race or young and old, but many people will find sexuality and gender much harder.

For some reason sex is one of those important, emotional, vital, issues. Its an important difference.

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As I have said all along, we won't all agree about all of this.
If would be foolish to think we would, it would be unrealistic.

It would also be very odd, given that since the beginning of the church, in the book of Acts, faithful, committed, Spirit-filled Christians have not agreed on every matter. They disagreed at the deepest level about whether Gentiles could join the church, and then whether they had to be circumcised to join.

And since then there have been many disagreements, big and small - as I've listed before - pacifism, Roman Church vs the Celtic church, can you have the bible in your own language, how far can Christianity accommodate African Culture, or South American, can we shop on a Sunday - the list of differences goes on.

And sad to say we haven't always dealt with the differences well.

Beuase given that we're bound to disagree surely one of the important things is to do it well - to be godly about it, to treat each other with respect and love, rather than being vicious or spiteful or resort to force or violence.

So what is good disagreement?

Here's my top tips -

First - remember we're not seeking 100% agreement.

Because there's lots of levels - from this is the best thing ever and we MUST do it this way, through, its GOOD, through, its OK, or I don't care, going to the I Don't like it but I can live with it, and all the way to - this is BAD, its IMPOSSIBLE for me to live with this decision.

We might be looking for a consensus, a decision where most people are generally ok with it.

Secondly - We are not trying to win the argument. I don't know if anyone has been argued into the kingdom of God, but we need to stop cajoling people - I know its hard, I'm the worst. But we can present what we think, as a reasonable proposition, with our experience or scripture or whatever. But not to score points, only to let them know where we are.

Thirdly - we need to focus on preserving our relationship with those we disagree.

What matters here is our relationship with each other, not being "right".

Paul says to the Gentiles and Jews in Romans - accept the weaker brother - don't make a big fuss - who are you to judge someone else's servant?

When the Bp of Salisbury made a comment in the House of Lords supporting gay marriage, he immediately called a meeting of all clergy who were opposed to gay marriage and they sat down for 3 hours and talked about it. They didn't agree, but the relationship was what mattered.

We are brothers and sisters in Christ first - despite our differences and no matter how deep.

Fourthly - and finally -

To disagree well what helps is being curious about why other people think like they do. I already know why I've got my opinions, what I don't know is why you think like that. Maybe if you explained, you told me your story, or how you interpret things, I'd understand you better. And maybe if I listen respectfully to you, you might do the same for me.

Sometimes we see these things a tug of war - one side against another, we have to drag the others over. But all that does is keep us trapped - struggling to pull harder, dig deeper, resist more - in greater and greater opposition.

The trick is to not pull away, but to lean in closer to each other... then we will both be free. (*Finger trap*)

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Where do we go from here?

Well next week is Messy church, then on June 23rd we're going to look at mental health -and how we can be inclusive there, and then on June 30th I'm going to talk about poverty.

But also on June 30th we're going to have a vote about whether to accept the inclusive church statement.

Everyone who comes to church will get a token, and on the way out you'll be able to drop it in a box for yes or a box for no - we'll try and do it so its secret - and then the result will go to the PCC the week after and we'll discuss whether or not we want to accept the Inclusive Church statement.

Then we'll be able to talk about this on July 14th at St James's Festival Weekend.

And I think whatever happens, on this journey since January, we've got to know the world a bit more and educated ourselves about these things. We've got to know each other a bit more, as we've shared at a deep level on Wednesday nights. We might have understood ourselves a bit more, and what we believed, and where those beliefs come from.

And we might have got a bit of a different glimpse of God.

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And its interesting because this inclusive thing, although it feels a bit inward looking - about us, are we inclusive, is actually quite missional, evangelistic.

Because when the church has the humility to say - we might have been wrong about this - it makes us more attractive, not less.

The church makes mistakes, maybe I can fit in there without being perfect.

Because when the church says - we welcome all people, no matter if they're black or white or gay or straight, then people can say - yes, their God is a God of love.

Because when the church says - look we can have differences and still get along together, we can disagree well, the world sits up and takes notice and says - YES! Yes please, teach us how to do this in Gaza and Israel, in the former Yugoslavia, in our politics, in social media, in every area there is polarisation and violent solutions.

Then the church would no longer be part of the problem - it would be the good news, the gospel, that the bride of Christ is meant to be.