

WHEN WE DISAGREE¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Third Sunday in Advent, 13 December 2020

You have to be sorry for Paul. He spent great effort in establishing new Christian communities in Greece and Asia Minor. He was conscientious in writing them letters, which usually begin by thanking God for them. Nevertheless, the actual purpose of the letter soon becomes apparent. In most cases, Paul wrote letters in order to bring the new Christians into line. In some cases, the problems were about correct teaching; in others, about behaviour.

That's what this morning's reading from 1 Thessalonians is about. We don't know exactly what happened to provoke Paul's words but the nature of the behaviour can be inferred. The Thessalonians were failing to respect their leaders. They were not at peace among themselves; they did not agree with each other and there was conflict between them. They did not practice mutual care. The list goes on.

Conflict of one kind or another is part of our readings today. Isaiah speaks to a world marked by oppression, grief, and imprisonment, by injustice, robbery and other wrongdoing. All these are symptoms of fundamental conflict in the human condition. By contrast, God loves justice and righteousness.

Our psalm represents a deep existential conflict: that between life and death. It may have arisen from the nation's survival from dire peril and expresses confidence that such rescues may recur. The curious last verses about sowing in tears and reaping with joy may be a reference to ancient fertility cults where the sowing represents the death of the fertility god and the reaping his resurrection. We can also note that Jesus used this analogy when he said:

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.²

Similarly, our gospel reading expresses conflict, this time more imminent and specific. This reading does not generalise about the world. It reveals the beginnings of the process that will lead to the deaths of both John the Baptist and Jesus. Make no mistake, the religious authorities recognised the threats posed by these radical preachers.

When they sent some officials to question John and discover who he imagined himself to be, they were seeking information with which to neutralise him. John was quite aware of their intent. At first, he declines to debate with them. He answers their questions with simple denial. When pressed further, he quotes Isaiah:

A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God'.³

Now the authorities think that they have caught him. He has denied being any recognisable figure, yet he engages in unauthorised religious activities. In the end, however, John's demise

¹ Readings: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28; John 1:6-8, 19-28

² John 12:24

³ Isaiah 40:3

comes when he engages in a political conflict with King Herod. No doubt the Jerusalem authorities were pleased to see the end of him.

We could place the conflicts represented in our readings in three layers. At the most general, represented by Isaiah and Psalm 126, we have conflicts arising from the human condition. They are present everywhere. In the middle, represented by our gospel reading, are conflicts in a particular society at a particular time. At the lowest level, represented by the Thessalonians, we have conflicts within a specific community.

To discover how these three levels interact, we might look at some recent events in the Anglican Church of Australia. At its 2019 synod, the Diocese of Wangaratta authorised a service for the blessing of marriages contracted under the Australian Marriage Act. That is, the synod authorised the blessing of civil marriages. Although the provision covered all such marriages, it was generally acknowledged that it would include same sex marriages now that they are legal.

The Diocese of Newcastle took similar action and also sought to change its disciplinary procedures so that clergy married according to secular law and clergy blessing such marriages would not be prosecuted through church procedures.

The Primate, as well as 25 members of General Synod, referred these questions to the Church's highest legal body, the Appellate Tribunal. The dioceses involved suspended the operation of their regulations in the interim. Last month, the tribunal said, in a 5 to 1 majority opinion, that there was no breach of the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia, making Wangaratta's action lawful. Newcastle's actions also became lawful.⁴ The week before last, the former Bishop of Wangaratta blessed the civil marriage of two male priests.⁵

It can come as no surprise that the tribunal's decision was welcomed by those who hold a more progressive view and denounced by those who hold more traditional views, including the Diocese of Sydney. Indeed, the author of the tribunal's minority opinion was a Sydney lawyer.

Conservative critics say that "the teaching of Scripture is that while marriage is not necessary for salvation nor for the experience of life to the full, obedience to God's Word is."⁶ If we seek God's commands, we would usually look to the Bible. What we find there is open to interpretation. So, after everything that has happened, we find ourselves back where the process started, an argument about the interpretation of scripture.

Arguments over the meaning of texts are inevitable. They happen everywhere all the time. They happen in universities, in the media, in law courts and in daily conversation. Sometimes the arguments are trivial, almost a game. Often, however, they are significant. Jesus engaged with the religious authorities of his day in just such arguments. On many occasions in the history of Christianity, such disagreements have led to divisions resulting in schisms, ostracization and, most regrettably, killing and war. The question is, therefore, not whether we have such arguments and disagreements, but how we deal with them.

⁴ [AT-Wangaratta-formatted-11112020FINAL.pdf \(anglican.org.au\)](#) and [AT-Newcastle-formatted-11112020-FINAL.pdf \(anglican.org.au\)](#)

⁵ [First same-sex marriage blessing conducted after Tribunal decision \(melbourneanglican.org.au\)](#)

⁶ [A Statement of the Board of Gafcon Australia – Appellate Tribunal Matters November 2020 – Gafcon Australia](#)

What do we think might happen now? More dioceses might follow Wangaratta and Newcastle, while other dioceses will confirm their opposition to such moves. Our General Synod meets next year and, without any doubt, this question will be high on the agenda. Those of us in the pews will just have to wait and see.

We should not imagine that any attempted resolution of this matter by General Synod will be effective. In an article in the online journal *The Conversation*, Dorothy Lee and Muriel Porter argue that a split is likely, although not inevitable.⁷ I argued the same point in our own *Parish Connections* when I reviewed the collection of papers about same-sex marriage published by the General Synod Doctrine Commission.⁸ The Australian church is already divided in practice. The recognition or non-recognition of female priesthood and episcopacy has already severed full communion. The question is not whether further divisions will arise, but how.

Of more importance may be the contribution of Bishop George Browning in the online public policy journal, *Pearls and Irritations*.⁹ Browning argues that our church finds itself irrelevant in a world that has moved on. The overwhelming victory of the same-sex plebiscite would not have been possible if considerable numbers of church members had not voted in favour. It is clear that conservative church leaders are out of step with both their own communities and society at large. Referring to the Lee and Porter article, Browning says that, more serious than a split, is the reinforcement of the growing irrelevance of the church in the public arena. He says:

Who wants to be part of a Church which prioritises divisive judgement on sexuality and gender whilst remaining silent on far more serious matters such as growing global financial inequity, world poverty, racism, intolerance, violence, and climate change?

Even if church leaders do not ignore those wider issues, their voices will hardly be heard, because they lack public plausibility. What we learn from this discussion is that our conflicts at the level of our own community affect our capacity to engage in the two other levels of conflict that I have described as coming from our readings; conflicts in our society and conflicts arising from the human condition. Although at different levels, the conflicts within today's readings are intimately related.

What then shall we do? Paul was not so foolish as to direct the Thessalonians not to disagree. That would have been futile. Disagreements, as I have shown, are inevitable. Paul required the Thessalonians to live in peace. Just because it is theoretically possible to do what Paul directs does not mean that it is easy to do so. In his contribution to the Doctrine Commission papers, Bishop Stephen Pickard points out that disagreements are necessary for us if we are to advance towards the truth.¹⁰ In this process, we need trust. He says that we should also understand that division within the church does not resolve any of the issues involved, even if it makes us feel justified.

In effect, we need to become the Body of Christ. In the Monastery of the Society of St John the Evangelist in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Bev and I worship while in Boston, the

⁷ [Is the Anglican Church about to split? It is facing the gravest threat to its unity in more than 200 years \(theconversation.com\)](http://theconversation.com)

⁸ [St James' Connections October-November 2019 | AnyFlip](#) p.16

⁹ [George Browning. Is the Anglican Church about to split? - Pearls and Irritations Pearls and Irritations \(johnmenadue.com\)](http://johnmenadue.com)

¹⁰ [Marriage-Doctrine-Essays-Final.pdf \(anglican.org.au\)](#) pp. 241-265



El Greco, St Paul, (1606), Museo del Greco, Toledo