

Storm Clouds Approaching The Anglican Church

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At our St Matthew's Vision day (17th March), I referenced some storm clouds which were approaching the Anglican church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia (ACANZP). What I was referring to was a motion before this year's General Synod in May 2018 to authorize the blessings of same-gendered relationships within the church.

On Sunday 18 March, I preached from Exodus 32, where Aaron fashions an idol for the Israelites to worship. I said the golden calf of our age is the assertion of:
"my right to choose my truth"

I believe the current debate around Euthanasia is an expression of this idol and Same-sex marriage is an earlier expression of idolatry within New Zealand (Western) culture, that the ACANZP is about to embrace. In May this year, General Synod will be debating a motion (29) to accept the blessings of same-gendered relationships.

How did we get here?

The seeds of the current crisis facing the Anglican communion go back at least as far as the consecration of a Bishop within The Episcopal Church (TEC) in America in 2003 who was living in a same-sex relationship. Since then the Canadian Anglican church and the Scottish Episcopal Church have embraced and endorsed same-sex marriage. This has caused the strong rebuke of Anglican church leaders (The Anglican Primates) from all around the globe especially in what is called the Global South (Africa, Asia, South America).

Locally in 2006, the then-Dunedin Bishop George Connor ordained a man in an openly gay relationship.

Within the ACNZP a number of attempts have been made to find a way to bless same-sex unions including:

Hermeneutical Huis	(x3)
Ma Whea commission	(2011)
Way forward report	(2014)
Motion 30	(2016)
Motion 29	(2018)

Some of these have tried to provide a theology for the blessings of same-sex unions, most explicitly, this was attempted in the Way Forward report but the many critiques of this were scathing in its failure to achieve anything like a coherent biblical basis for such a theology.

St Matthew's Statement on Human Sexuality May 2013

In 2013, our church leadership made the following statement:

"That St Matthew's Leadership Team (Vestry, Ministry Leaders Team and Clergy) endorse the Anglican Communion's position on Human sexuality as defined in 1998 Lambeth Resolution 1.10, sections b, c, d, and e

(b) in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage;

(c) recognises that there are among us persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Many of these are members of the Church and are

seeking the pastoral care, moral direction of the Church, and God's transforming power for the living of their lives and the ordering of relationships. We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ;

(d) while rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture, calls on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialization and commercialisation of sex;

(e) cannot advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same-gender unions;"

At the same meeting, we also adopted a pastoral stance towards homosexual relationships of 'acknowledgement' as outlined in my paper where we describe *Homosexual expression is an outworking of the fall, in the same way that greed, envy, deceit and malice and idolatry is referred to in scripture (Romans 1:29). It is to be acknowledged and ministered to by the church in love. Part of the journey to relational righteousness is through celibate relationships while maintaining a vocational call of singleness.*

St Matthew's Survey 2015

In June 2015, St Matthew's Vestry commissioned a survey of our people. Approx. 100 people completed the survey. When asked

Would you personally be willing to be part of a church within a denomination which allowed the blessing of same-sex relationships

57 % said no they would not.

16 % were unsure

27% yes they were

What is Motion 29?

Basically, Motion 29 is a pragmatic proposal aimed at keeping the ACANZP church together while allowing for the blessings of same-sex relationships. If adopted at General Synod in May 2018 it will allow

1. "diocesan bishops to authorize individual clergy to conduct services blessing same-gender relationships".
2. Recognise Orders of Christian communities to respect and protect theological convictions Eg an AFFIRM community.
3. Not alter the formularies (ie not change the definition of marriage)
4. Provide protection for dissenting voices (bishops and clergy)

Whether it achieves 3 & 4 is very debatable. Legal advice from two Queens Counsel lawyers suggests it does not protect clergy from liability in a secular court of law.

Why can't we Just get on with being St Matthew's?

Since being called to be the Vicar at St Matthew's in January 2006, I have worked hard at presenting an orthodox voice from within the diocese and nationally, sitting on the AFFIRM council (nine years). I have engaged actively and proactively by serving on diocesan council (seven years) and for the last five years as the Dunedin Archdeacon. What is being proposed in Motion 29 appears to me to be a step into false teaching, contrary to the unified witness of scripture, a denial of what it means to be faithful, human, image bearers, in our maleness and femaleness and as such an idolatrous step away from our God.

The church has never been a doctrinally pure fellowship and has always wrestled with what it means to be faithful to God and His revealed word. To bless something that God calls an abomination (Leviticus 18:22) and what the Apostle Paul describes as inviting the Wrath of God (Romans 1:18-32) seems destined to invite the judgement of God upon the church. In the words of Jay Behan; "it seems to cross a line."

First order Matters

The current constitution of the ACANZP is built on Formularies which states ***This Branch of the United Church of England and Ireland in New Zealand doth hold and maintain the Doctrine and Sacraments of CHRIST as the LORD hath commanded in His Holy Word,***

General Synod cannot change matters of doctrine. As such it seems this motion is unconstitutional but the power brokers of General Synod seem hell-bent on pushing it through despite strong opposition across the national church.

The reformers had a saying:

**In Essentials Unity,
In Non-essentials liberty
In all things charity (love)**

This is a helpful grid which allows us to realise there are matters about which the church can and does disagree on. The structure of church governance, the age and manner of baptism, the role of women in leadership have all caused strong debate and dispute over church history but most realise that these are matters of secondary (or to use the quote above of non-essential) importance. So we are able to agree to disagree without compromising our faithfulness to God and the Bible.

How do we decide what is an 'Essential' or First order matter? In my mind, matters of 'Essentials' include:

- our doctrine around the creeds: so the triune nature of God,
- the gospel as recorded in scripture and
- matters which affect our Salvation

are all essential. If the teaching of the church is going to lead people away from salvation and into Gods judgement then we are surely dealing with something essential?

1Cor 6:9 Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

This warning is repeated in Revelation 22:15. As a teacher of scripture, I cannot be ambivalent about matters of salvation. I will have to stand before Christ one day and give an account for my teaching and the teaching of our church.

My Pastoral Commitment To All People Who Join St Matthew's.

Because of the aggressive and provocative implementation of the proposed Motion 29, I have at times, heard the tone of my opposition to be more dogmatic than I might want to be. We are dealing with real people who have real struggles, not abstract doctrines.

Within my family, I have two sister-in-laws and one brother who identify as homosexual. I have nothing but the love and truth of Jesus Christ to offer to any person who identifies as LGBTI. Just as surely, I have nothing but the love and truth of Jesus Christ to offer to heterosexuals who remain single throughout their life.

This year I have been a part of the planning team (along with Pastors Adam Dodds and Peter Cheyne) in inviting Sam Allberry, an Anglican ordained minister who identifies as same-sex attracted and is committed to a celibate life, to come to Dunedin in September 2018. I encourage you to listen to Sam's testimony here and his description of his identity being in Christ.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCLms7J84JY>

The gift of singleness and celibacy seems to have been somehow lost in the emotion of this debate which has been framed in terms of justice in our western media while the call to righteousness has been somehow lost. The following site called Living Out describes what I see as a pastorally sensitive and biblically faithful stance in the area of human sexuality; <http://www.livingout.org/>

My commitment to anyone that God calls me to minister to, is to extend the gospel of Jesus Christ that they may know, the redeeming, restoring, reconciling love that God holds out to everyone who in repentance and faith receive this gospel as revealed in the scriptures. God does not set a different criteria of salvation for one person to another. Just as clearly, God's love does not excuse anyone of obedience to all his commands (John 15:10).

My pastoral commitment to all is to extend arms open wide to all, to know the love of Christ and to encourage them to respond in obedience to his truth.

The absence of biblical theology of Marriage or Blessing

Perhaps the starkest criticism of motion 29 is the complete absence of a theology for same-gendered people or a theology for blessing.

Jesus, in the context of teaching on divorce, gives us a concise and clear articulation of marriage in Matthew 19:4-6

“Haven't you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

In my mind, Motion 29 is simply wrong at so many levels. The warning of scripture is clear:

“Woe to those who call evil good and good evil,”* *Isaiah 5:20

It deeply saddens me what Motion 29 will do to our church. I believe the Methodist church is our clearest indication in New Zealand of what this move will do to our church.

As I write this document, I note that the current Bishop of Christchurch has resigned, effective one week before General Synod. She will not be the last to leave the ACANZP but as a local church, we must prayerfully discern what God would have us do.

Yours in Christ

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Vicar