

Ephesians 4:1-16

Mark 7:24-37

At the Church Council meeting at the end of the month I will be bringing a proposal for consideration that weddings between same sex couples be permitted in the Highfield Rd church. The authority to make this decision is within the Church Council's authority and is their responsibility to make such a decision. The Church Council may decide also to consult with the congregation about this matter. But the outcome of considering the proposal will not be a *fait accompli* – one way or the other. So, while you might feel on the one hand anxious about the council considering this or on the other hand are in disbelief that there is even a need for us to be talking about this then let's be patient and seek to listen.

At its meeting in 2018, the year after the same sex marriage plebiscite, the Uniting Church Assembly determined two things in relation to the marriage of same sex couples using the approved marriage rites of the Uniting Church. Firstly, that Uniting Church ministers could choose to solemnise the marriage of same sex couples; or not. As clergy, the choice is ours according to conscience and belief. And, secondly, the Assembly reaffirmed the role of Church Councils, under their authority to determine the use of congregational property, to decide whether same sex weddings could take place on the property for which they have oversight.

The 2018 Assembly meeting was a difficult meeting with a lot of tension and conflict over the possibility that this decision was being called for. Some were appalled by the decision to allow same-sex marriage, while others felt that the compromise decision, based on individual and local conscience and belief, was a non-decision; a kind of bet each way decision. The Assembly made the decision in order to be able to allow for and accept the diversity within its life and so to enable its ministers and congregations to act with integrity in accordance with their beliefs.

What I hope to do today, next Sunday and the following Sunday is explore three things:

- how it is that we make decisions in the Uniting Church and the factors we bring to that decision making – while not directly related to the question of sexuality it will help us understand how collectively as a church we discern how we are going to be church; how we are going to give expression, as best we are able, to be the church following in the way of Jesus in the our present context. This will be as much a reminder of how we seek to discern any question in the church, as much as it is an exploration of SS marriage.
- In week two I will explore how we as a church came to be making decisions about faith and sexuality,
- then I want to explore the nature of marriage in our contemporary society, how marriage appears in scripture, how the understanding and practice of marriage has changed over time, especially in our own lifetimes, and what it is that a couple, the minister *and* the gathered congregation are doing in the marriage service.

You may feel like there is a lot of detail here and I apologise if this feels like a lecture. You'll find the text of the sermon on the website after each Sunday, including some further background information. And, each Sunday, if you want to ask questions or discuss the issues I have raised further you can come and chat in my study.

What I am wanting us to reflect on today is thinking about how we make decisions as Christians. Often life pulls us along by the scruff of the neck and we find ourselves making, or being forced to make, decisions that afterwards we find ourselves reconsidering or in hindsight wonder: how on earth was this or that allowed to go on for so long?

For myself I distil this ethical question down to the simple question, I hope not simplistic, question: *who am I becoming? Who are we becoming?* As disciples of Jesus we are called both individually and collectively to embody the way of Christ. This is Jesus' calling to the church; it is the gift of the spirit which we affirm is ours. So, I believe

the question for us always as church – local, national, global – is always the question: how is it we need to be in order to embody and reflect the grace of God which has been shown to us in Jesus. Who are we becoming if we make this choice? Who are we becoming if we make that choice? Does this reflect the way of Jesus?

Since our inception in 1977 the Uniting Church has sought to do this as best as it is able. There are a number of commitments in our Basis of Union about the things we consider foundational as we seek to be church. These commitments are like signposts for us – pointers to the kind of church our forefathers and mothers sought for us to be and to remind us of those things that we carry with us pilgrims, always on the way to the promised goal.

In a somewhat hostile conversation a few years ago, the sister of an old friend asked me: anyway, what does the Uniting Church believe! The inference was: to my mind, you're flaky!

The commitment to being pilgrims, always on the way to the promised goal, means that that we are not a church with beliefs set in stone but have a commitment to continual reform. Faith, personal and collective, is about being open to the unfolding mystery that is God in our lives and our world. The reflecting that this openness calls for is a practice of discernment which calls for a dialogue – personal and collective: who am I going to be? Who are we going to be?

From our Methodist heritage we receive what is known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. It was a method that John Wesley developed for discernment, and it has four elements to which he says we should give attention when seeking to discern the way of God, as shown to us in Jesus. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral has informed the way we order our theological reflection in the Uniting Church.

These four things are: scripture, reason, tradition and experience. My colleague Alistair Macrae says, being Christian is complicated, because it doesn't allow for easy answers and the quadrilateral provokes us to wrestle with these four elements, none of which are set in stone or absolute; it is a process which denies us easy answers and simplistic solutions.

SCRIPTURE

The Basis is clear about how scripture is to be regarded in the Uniting Church.

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated. When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, its message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses.

So we can ask about churches which might proclaim a prosperity theology, that we will become prosperous if we follow Jesus, whether this prosperity theology is really in accord with the biblical witness to Jesus, whose concern was always with the poor. In relation to the church's mistreatment and condemnation of queer people through the church's history, we might ask whether this has been in accord with the treatment of the marginalised and excluded by Jesus. And we might ask if we want to search scripture for certainty about marriage, we have to acknowledge that most of the marriage arrangements in our scriptures, according to modern understanding of marriage are somewhat irregular, if not illegal.

We might hope that scripture will give us straightforward answers to our curly ethical questions. But often it doesn't. So, we must bring other approaches to bear on our reflection.

TRADITION

So often when people use the word tradition, they speak of it as though it is some kind of perfect, unquestionable past which we inherit. But we know as Australian's that our heritage, our inheritance, our tradition in relation to the indigenous people of Australia needs careful and honest re-evaluation.

In the context of Wesleyan Theology, tradition refers to the accumulated beliefs and practices of the church down through the centuries. Wesley recognized the importance of church history, arguing that every faithful biblical interpretation must be historically-informed; we don't exist in a vacuum and it really helps to understand how we got to where we are and whether the path that has led us to this point was a right one in our endeavours following in the way of Jesus. To enable our exploration of our traditions, a whole variety of fields of scholarship have developed over the last few centuries which have enabled biblical scholars to be able to see behind biblical texts and historical events to gain a greater sense of the context of the situation and so glean greater insight to its meaning and implications in our time.

The Basis of Union affirms: The Uniting Church prays that, through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life, will bring it into deeper unity with other Churches ... This calls us to honest re-examination of the beliefs and practices of the past.

The practice of slavery, the treatment of women as second-order human beings, the denial of the ministry of women were all traditions or practices which were justified by scripture but at some point in time came to be questioned. The Uniting Church responding to the commitment in the Basis of Union has been willing to undertake an honest examination of the mistreatment of queer people through history and still in our own time. So much abuse of queer people has been and still is justified with a religious rationale.

The word tradition has the same root as the word to trade and to trade is to negotiate. We have to negotiate with our past and what we have received from it; to celebrate its riches and also to be honest about the misunderstandings, the failings and the tragedies of the past.

One of the tensions over the past sixty years of contraction of the church has been a tendency to grasp onto what people have believed to be "our" tradition. Often, I have found though that the tradition is only as deep as the last generation of two, but it is asserted and defended as unchangeable.

The church historian Jaroslav Pelikan says that *tradition is the living faith of the dead* while *traditionalism is the dead faith of the living*. The challenge is for us to sort out what it is we are trying to preserve or protect.

REASON

Reason, as an aspect of the quadrilateral is based on the assumption that the human mind is endowed with the ability to understand God's revealed truth. While considering Scripture to be of foundational importance, Wesley recognized the immense value of philosophy and the sciences and taught others about the value of these disciplines. This is an essential part of our training as Uniting Church ministers.

The Uniting Church acknowledges that God has never left the Church without faithful and scholarly interpreters of Scripture, or without those who have reflected deeply upon, and acted trustingly in obedience to, God's living Word. In particular the Uniting Church enters into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries, and gives thanks for the knowledge of God's ways with humanity which are open to an informed faith.

Reason is so important that without it, information derived from Scripture, tradition, and experience cannot be formulated and assimilated – this assimilation of scripture, tradition and experience fulfils Paul's encouragement to the Roman church to *be transformed by the renewal of your minds*. But, it is not uncommon for new ministerial candidates to arrive at theological college with the warning from someone in their ears: don't go to theological college. It will destroy your faith!

While we use our reason in just about every aspect of our lives, too often faith is promoted as a kind of suspension of reason; a sphere to which we should not apply our reason; indeed too many young people in the

church have been dismissed with the notion that to ask probing, curious, cheeky questions is unfaithful, disrespectful, impertinent.

We are not to leave our brains at the door when we come to church, as though to do so is somehow a measure of devotion. When Jesus says love the Lord with heart mind and soul – he means it.

EXPERIENCE

We come to what is the fourth side of the quadrilateral which has really been the thing which has moved the debate, the understanding, the affirmations and commitments in the Uniting Church around sexuality. Because we have listened to people's experience and we have been willing to hear it and to incorporate it into our understanding of what it means to be Christian, and what it means to be church.

Too often in the church a person's experience is denied, if not denounced, by the application of scripture or of tradition. If we inclined to do this and we give priority to scripture, then we try to hunt down bible passages to denounce and maybe, in some way or other, labelling a person a sinner. If we give priority to tradition and the teachings of the past, it is often claimed that the tradition is this and so who you are or what you want should be disallowed.

The Basis of Union affirms that God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The Church's call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself.

To be a people of reconciliation means that we need to be willing to hear people's experience and to be changed ourselves as we listen to that experience and incorporate it into ourselves.

For those of us who have had connection with queer people, our own experience of them – of knowing them, being loved by and loving them, sharing our lives with them - has changed us. Whether this be work colleagues, children, our children's friends, others we have rubbed shoulders with. Maybe we have had to consider the position which we have received from the past and ask the question – does God condemn this person? And for many of us the answer has been: no! Maybe we haven't used this method of Wesley's. But maybe we have used in an intuitive way, not recognising that we were actually undertaking some theological reflection without knowing it. Wesley's method gives us tools to do this in a conscious way and as we journey together as pilgrims may we more fully embody the way of Jesus.

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