

Psalm 130

Ephesians 4. 25 – 5.2

Mark 8. 27-38

In 1981 Chris and I were living in Balwyn. At this time she was helping run the youth group in our church at Heidelberg-East Ivanhoe. By virtue of being a young leader, she was invited to be one of the congregation's representatives on the Yarra Valley Presbytery. Presbytery meetings in those days were far more vibrant than the pallid echoes they are at present. Meetings were held on weeknights and would often finish late. I would have invariably gone off to bed and fallen asleep by the time she arrived home. But on one particular night she arrived home, late as usual, and roused me from my slumber.

That night at the meeting the current crop of ministry candidates was presented to the meeting in readiness for ordination. In the UCA the presbytery determines if a ministry candidate is ready for ordination and once they receive a call into a placement, the ordination service can then take place. One of the ministry candidates who presented that night said to the members – and I paraphrase: *in considering whether you discern me to be ready for ordination I want you to know that I am a lesbian. As you discern my readiness, I want you to know this. I don't want this process to be a don't ask – don't tell situation. I don't want to hide my sexuality from you and I don't want us as a church to pretend together.* It was as though she had truly taken the encouragement from the Letter to the Ephesians we have just heard, to heart: *So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another.*

While from the 1970s the Methodist and Presbyterian churches had publicly been very active in law reform in relation to homosexuality, this request to the Yarra Valley Presbytery meant that we as a new church – just four years old at this stage – had to address a whole lot of questions ourselves about what it meant to be church – our understanding of God and the embrace of God, our understanding of scripture and how we read it, the legacy of the past and how we had treated rainbow people up to this point in time, what it means to be church and how we understand ourselves to be *members of one another*, and questions of suitability for leadership – and to hear people's experience of faith, without condemning them as people. In many ways this was a task which called for us to use the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, of which I spoke last week – discerning what it means to integrate scripture, tradition, reason and experience in the way we order our life together. A process of integrating both personal experience and collective experience into our understanding of our faith.

What this courageous person did was she asked the presbytery and then, as a consequence, the whole church, to take her experience seriously – her experience of who she had found herself to be as human person and as a person of Christian faith. She had come to understand that the two could not be divided, compartmentalised, shut down. This is who I am! Who do you say that I am?

Between 1981 and 2018 - over thirty seven years throughout the church - in congregations, presbyteries, synods, to the national Assembly, the church has struggled with these questions of sexuality, membership and leadership. It has been a difficult and painful journey at times, especially in the years leading up to 2003 and the 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly where the Assembly determined

that a person's sexuality is not a barrier to their ordination and then in 2018 when the Assembly determined that same sex couples could be married by Uniting Church ministers in Uniting churches.

It is the Assembly's role to determine matters of church doctrine and to make whole-of-church commitments that order the church. It is also the Assembly's role to clarify policy and develop regulations to guide the life of the church. Throughout these years the process of Consensus Decision Making was used as the church sought to move forward as *members of one another*. Nevertheless, there were intense strains on our unity and ultimately, at some decision points, both individuals and, in some cases, whole congregations left the church. These debates, deliberations and decisions were difficult for many groups within the church for varying reasons: for the Rainbow Community, for many migrant ethnic communities and congregations, for indigenous members of the church, and as a whole the UAICC and it brought into sharp distinction the differing ways of reading scripture and understanding its authority across the church.

I find it strange, though, the amount of heat that any attempts to have discussion and make decisions around sexuality in the church creates. Immense heat. What this is about I cannot quite fathom? I don't know how you experience it?

My own experience in relation to rainbow people, is that I have found my self in close friendship with many from different places and walks of life over my adult life. Individuals and couples, some of whom have chosen to marry. I love them all and they bring enormous richness and joy to my life. I have many rainbow colleagues in ministry and they are a mixed bag, as my hetero colleagues are a mixed bag.

But the abiding theme in their lives is the pain and difficulty of their journey; firstly in being able to acknowledge to themselves that they are drawn to people of the same sex and what that may mean in terms of how they are accepted by family and friends, and; secondly the discrimination, if not outright hostility and cruelty, that they bear the brunt of.

The statistics tell the story: LGBTIQ+ people have poorer health outcomes than the broader community, particularly in regard to mental health and suicide, some cancers, and alcohol and other drugs use. LGBTIQ+ people are less likely to access health services due to experiences of stigma and discrimination. They face social exclusion, verbal abuse, public violence, sexual assault, and physical attack, including from family members. It is not unusual for young people to be turned out of home once they do come out.

In 2013 I was co-director of the visit of Bishop Gene Robinson to Melbourne. It was the consecration of Gene as Bishop of New Hampshire in the USA in 2004 that has created an almost irreconcilable split in the world-wide Anglican communion. Gene had to wear a bullet-proof vest in his consecration service and he was flanked by FBI agents, masquerading as deacons, in order to protect him, such was the vitriol directed toward him.

My colleague, Avril Hannah Jones, minister at North Balwyn Uniting, who identifies as a bi-woman, was labelled by a family friend as the *spawn of Satan*, when she came out. Her mother, you might imagine, was not impressed – the implication of the appalling remark being that either mother was Satan herself or had been having assignations with him. Who do you say that I am? Child of God? Spawn of Satan?

Here is some language or labelling which you might associate with public discourse, including discourse in the church, about rainbow people. Maybe it's language you grew up with in some sphere of your life. Words like deviant, disordered, disgusting, unnatural, perverted, immoral, the unnameable vice. The implication of all these words is that these as people are fundamentally flawed, disordered, fallen. The trouble is this way of describing rainbow people has its roots deeply in the church and in Christian theology.

The medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas developed a kind of all-encompassing theological summary as a way of teaching moral theology; known as his *Summa Theologica*. It became an enormously influential work. Aquinas sought to develop a complete account of heaven and hell and the whole damn thing, what philosophers call a metaphysics of the first causes of things and the nature of being. It was an ambitious, standardising kind of project and the assumption behind it was that there is some kind of natural order behind all things. Aquinas sought to lay this out in a his ambitious project.

The trouble is he based much of his thought on Aristotle's understanding of biology and the human person, an understanding drawn from 1600 years before. All at the same time as trying to find evidence and proofs in scripture to undergird his *summa*. Underlying all of this was the assumption that there is natural order to the world, which can be identified and codified. This work quickly became deeply influential.

The *Summa* was adopted by the Western Church in his lifetime, the 1200s, and became the foundation for moral theology in the church from then on, late into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The reformations in the European church began three to four centuries after Aquinas wrote the *Summa* but the impact of his theology continued to inform and shape those new churches as they emerged. And from that heritage we come.

Why I say this is that Aquinas laid out what he thought was the basis for the natural order of human being; the right essence of human being. And the implication of this – especially coupled with a Christian doctrine of The Fall - is that there is also an unnatural expression of human being: deviant, disordered, disgusting, unnatural, perverted. The linguistic root of so much hatred directed at rainbow people. Who do you say that I am?

I drew from the Basis of Union last week – again on these issues it informs and draws us forward: *Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command people's attention and awaken faith; he calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be the disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church.*

*The Uniting Church prays that she may be ready when occasion demands to confess her Lord in fresh words and deeds. Our struggle as a church has been to express our life, our being members of one another, in fresh words and deeds.*

Who do you say that I am?

As we move toward considering the nature of Christian marriage next week, I want to invite us to think about blessings and curses. At the heart of the Christian marriage service, indeed the distinctive element of the Christian marriage service, is a blessing, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Who do you say that we are? This is the question for each of us personally and for us collectively, called as we are to be members of one another.

Andrew Boyle

Listen [here](#) to an interview with the Rev. Dr Avril Hannah Jones about the acceptance and love from her family and the Uniting Church.

Bible and homosexuality - You can find an article [here](#) by the Rev. Dr Walter Wink, entitled Homosexuality and the Bible from a biblical perspective.

Bible and homosexuality - You can find a brief article [here](#) from 2008, prepared for the UCA Doctrine Working Group by Australian biblical scholar Rev. Dr Bill Loader, entitled Biblical Perspectives on Homosexuality and Leadership.

Marriage – you can find a comments paper [here](#) on the Uniting Churches Discussion Paper on Marriage by Rev. Dr Bill Loader

The history of Uniting Church decisions on [Sexuality and Leadership](#)