

## **An Anglican Preface to the Wijngaards Project**

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In 2014, Emma and I were delighted to receive an invitation to write an introduction for the *NRSV Wedding Gift Bible*. We wrote some ideas down separately, drafted some copy, and then worked together to make a single text. (I reluctantly redacted my mantra: scriptures are like sausages - delicious, wholesome and nourishing - but you really don't want to see how they're actually made). We posted off the agreed text, and thought little more of it.

I included a note to the publisher with the final text. I said that in the spirit of the *NRSV* translation, we had taken care to avoid using gendered pronouns for God, where possible. And we had also done the same for the individuals who were getting married. So you could give this bible to any couple. Yes, any. So two women, or two men, could receive the gift of Holy Scripture to celebrate their wedding. The bible is for everyone, after all.

Since then, there has been no negativity; not even a scintilla. Because back then in 2014, it was reasonable to suppose society was progressive and inclusive, and broadly tolerant. And becoming more so. Yet as we know, subsequent events have challenged these rather comfortable, even smug assumptions. Our culture has moved, quite suddenly, from being progressive to one that is wary and reactive. We live in an age of austerity, alienation and anxiety. As Pankaj Mishra's book has recently argued, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (2017), we are now riddled with paranoid hatreds in our close-knit world; plagued with nativism, vengeful nationalism, misogyny and racism. There are undertones of resurgent gynophobia and homophobia too, coupled to societies that are susceptible to assertive, charismatic demagogues who capitalise on social demoralisation and nationalistic nostalgia. So, no wonder some compare our present to the Europe of the 1930's.

Therapists have a name for this behaviour: projective identification. It is the means by which one makes one feelings or pain known, by acting in such a way as to cause the other person to feel precisely what the projector is feeling. It is often a defence mechanism, and is frequently a form of communication. Institutions and societies that cannot resolve their inner tensions, chaos or confusion, and so feel powerless, will frequently impose that impotence on to other groups. Shame, or perhaps rage, and other feelings that groups believe should be repressed, can be transferred to others too.

We see this in the recent report from the House of Bishops' 2020 *Living in Faith and Love* on same-sex relations. The significant changes in contemporary culture in respect of gender and sexuality have left the bishops feeling confused and powerless. The acerbic inner tensions within the church on such issues - complex debates on humanity and sexuality - leave them feeling and impotent. They project that powerlessness on to the groups who most need compassion and liberation.

This is all pretty strange when you think about it. Jesus never talked about sex. Never. Yet the church never stops. Never. Yet it can't seem to really *listen*. The church is all monologue, not dialogue: stuck on broadcast mode, we have forgotten that we also need to be receivers, and that the Holy Spirit often speaks to God's people through cultural change and disruptions.

Jesus did, at least, have some 'shared conversations'. The woman caught in adultery (forgiven; and the other guilty party not mentioned, incidentally - *John* 8: 1-11) and the Samaritan woman who had been married many times (*John* 4: 1-42): and both are treated with kindness and compassion. Indeed, everything Jesus was about, said and did - and equally, refrained from, being saying and doing - is an expression of God's love. Jesus is, in all senses, the body-language of God. Jesus hears the unheard; sees the unseen; touches the untouchable; and speaks to and for those who are muted. Jesus is incarnate - the sensate body of God, in human flesh, feeling, weeping, loving losing and rejoicing as one *of us*: one *with us*.

The etymology of the term 'compassion' comes from the Latin word, meaning 'co-suffering'. To have com-*passion* is to suffer alongside, and so very deeply with, the very ones we seek to help. We enter into their experience. Just as Christ, in his *compassion*, fully entered into our flesh; he became like us. And ultimately experienced the same scorn and hatred in his flesh that had been inflicted upon so many of the victims he had healed, loved and nurtured. Christ's incarnation and our redemption is rooted in God's *passion for us*; and his *com-compassion* poured into the one who loved us enough to fully abide with us: Christ, no less.

As an Anglican I welcome this fine work from Hans Wijngaards. Compassion is much more involved than any mere empathy. As Pope Francis has repeatedly reminded us, it is no good 'understanding' the pain of the world, plight of the poor and the injustice visited upon the marginalised and oppressed. The church needs to be Christ-like: becoming the one who has compassion, and has an active desire to alleviate the suffering of another. The mission of the church includes saving people from sin. But more often we are called to save people from alienating, visceral forces of hatred that oppress others - and to which Jesus was (and is) so openly opposed.

Like Hans Wijngaards, I am humble and glad to stand with my sisters and brothers in the LGBTQ community, and to work for those who long for their love to be affirmed in equal marriage. Those marriages that I have personally attended, preached at or been permitted to take part in the celebration of, have taught me that all of us are constantly schooled in love, and that for anyone to turn their back, and close their eyes and ears to the manifestation of loving unions, is turning away from God. This is how This is how the *First Epistle of John* puts it to us (I Jn. 4: 16): “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them”.

If we cannot see God in the love and tenderness of other faithful unions, we cannot see God. That is one of the reasons why the resistance to affirming equal marriage must be unmasked. The projective identification of those in power does not manage empathy, let alone sympathy. And somewhere in this, there is the ongoing protection of a white, male heterogeneity that sees itself as ‘normal’, and the experience and pain of everyone else as merely ‘other’. ‘Othering’ is not so much a sub-text embedded in the report: it is quite explicitly, *the* text.

What is needed, then, is some revolutionary emotional and ecclesial intelligence to rectify this. Otherwise, the Church of England will continue to be a place that is full of ‘states of unfeeling’. It won’t even be able to enter into the experience of women, let alone LGBTQ sisters and brothers, who are part of the church. As Harvey Cox noted in *On Not Leaving it to the Snake* (1968), the first and original sin is not disobedience. It is, rather, indifference. We can no longer ignore the pain and alienation that others in the church experience - and especially when this is *because* of the church. Indifference is pitiful, and it is the enemy of compassion. Our age may well be one of anger, austerity and anxiety. But it is in such times that the church needs to recover its primary calling and roots. Rooted, indeed, in the one who was com- passionate with us, and in Christ, continues to call us to full, loving humanity, one with another.

So I return to where I started: with the *NRSV Wedding Gift Bible*. Why did we write the introduction in the way that we did? It was not, let me reassure you, a nod to some kind of misplaced political correctness. It was simple act of compassion: a calculated and heartfelt act that recognised the men and women we know personally - who have married, or are in civil partnerships - and whose love for each other is something that spills over into the lives of others, enrich society. Just like any other marriage. We have been to blessings of unions, and to marriages, and participated in these with prayers and preaching. We simply wanted to recognise, affirm and celebrate the intrinsic *goodness* of such relationships, and the presence of Christ in such love, and the delight of God in such unions.

Our beloved Church of England languished in a state of unfeeling. To the pain of others within its own body and polity, it is shamefully indifferent and impotent. Its leaders project their inner angst and tension on to the very groups that look to them for love, mercy and compassion. The result is the slow procrastination and the torturing alienation of people who are only looking for their love, lives and very being to be fully affirmed and embraced. Yet the church cannot seem to do this.

Are there limits to this compassion? For the church, alas, yes. But not for Christ. It is this cross of Christ that absorbs our hatreds, and our violence towards one another. It is in this place that the compassion of God speaks at its fullest. This is where we see that Christ looks at us with pity, and not with blame. It is perhaps in such a place that some genuine and shared conversations might begin again: all of us recognising that Christ has, amazingly, saved us, in spite of ourselves.

No matter what we want to project on to God, or on to one another, all Christ does with this is to look back at us. Not with hatred, or with judgement - but with a love that is wider than the measure of our minds, and deeper than the depths of our hearts. God is full of love for all humanity, not just a chosen few. We cannot earn it for ourselves, nor indeed deprive or ration it out to others. That's the amazing thing about grace: it is free and abundant. Future shared conversations could begin in such places, and with such grace. Hans Wijngaards' excellent work, and that of the Institute that bears his name, have undertaken a valuable and costly vocation: to walk the way of Christ, and love and learn from our neighbours. To give and receive that love. To be humble, and know that the love between others can teach us more about God, and more about ourselves.

God calls us all to live in faith and love, and to rejoice with all others who do likewise. And for those who can't live in faith or in love, God calls us especially to them – that they may be lifted up to their full humanity through sharing in our faith and love for them. That ought not to be too hard for Anglicans, for it is the calling of all Christians: to love, as God first loved us. This is how the *First Epistle of John* puts it to us (I Jn. 4: 18-20):

<sup>18</sup>There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. <sup>19</sup>We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup>Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.