

“A Conversation Hardly Begun”: reflections on shared conversations, Keith Sinclair Bishop of Birkenhead September 2015.

Introduction

In 2009 Oliver O Donovan published a book “A Conversation Waiting to Begin”. It was a plea for the church to be “seriously patient” in trying to address her disagreements over human sexuality. The phrase recurred in my mind during the recent experience of a shared conversation for the dioceses of Chester, Liverpool and Manchester as part of the national series of conversations requested by the House of Bishops following the Pilling Report.

I approached the conversations with serious misgivings, in part because of the experiences of others in other parts of the country, but also with a fundamental question as to whether these conversations could bear the weight that would be placed upon them for somehow finding a way for the Church of England to resolve her differences. Could there be a “disagreement”, good or otherwise, which somehow did not act as a cover for “disobedience” which is not good? Was human experience being offered as the basis for the Church’s teaching and ministry which superseded her confidence in Scripture as the supreme authority? In the dissenting statement which was part of the Pilling Report I had said “continuing discussion, without reference to the authority of biblical teaching and its place in the evaluation of tradition, reason and experience in the life of the Church will create further division and impaired fellowship within the Church of England and the Anglican Communion.”(para 484); would that be the outcome of these shared conversations?

It is to the credit of the facilitators that some of these concerns were recognised in the framing of the conversation including the emphasis that they were not part of some predetermined outcome. There was recognition of different readings of scripture without the intention or space given for exploring or resolving those differences. Whether they have created “further division” remains to be seen. I suppose that depends on the relationships and reports of those who attended and the ways in which the wider Church responds to those relationships and reports.

I would like to share three reflections on my experience of these conversations and preface these comments by thanking the facilitators and the other participants. I think there was considerable respect for the process, and I heard those present from right across the spectrum of opinion expressing views with courtesy and with what I think I would characterise as a growing appetite for listening, both to scripture and to each other.

The chasm

The first reflection is the extent of the chasm between those who read scripture differently. This is in part reflective of the different weight given to scripture in the different spiritualities of those present. These differences are seen not only in the interpretation of individual texts but also the way the “big picture” of scripture is conceived and believed. Are creation, the gospel and final judgement seen to be relevant to our identity as male and female in the image of God, our potential as married or unmarried in the kingdom of God, and our destiny as part of the union of the bride and bridegroom in the new heaven and earth? Apart from recognising differences and noting them, the conversations did not devote time to allow exploration or resolution. If we were representative of

the whole Church of England to any extent, then this chasm in our reading is deep and the conversations were not designed to achieve convergence. It is a question as to whether there could ever be good disagreement in the Church, where such disagreement in the reading of scripture remains unaddressed.

There were two glimmers of hope for me. One the plea from another for the “patient reading of scripture” to take place in our parishes, dioceses and provinces as a way to seriously let the Holy Spirit instruct us; would we be patient? The other the description of a bible study in one of the three dioceses including people of radically different perspectives which, it was said, significantly contributed to unity. These glimmers took me back to Oliver O Donovan’s book. Could our shared conversations have been the beginning of the conversation he envisaged, could we still be “seriously patient”?

What would such a “patient reading” cover? I think there are at least three distinct areas.

First, that we should consider the “big picture” of scripture as well as the key texts. One guest posed the question of “what is core?” thinking especially of the Creeds. Is our human identity, male and female, part of “the all things” made by our Creator and redeemed by our Lord Jesus Christ, and can we accept God’s gift of that identity or must we redefine it?

Second, that we should consider the numerous warnings in scripture about assimilation with the surrounding culture and the presence of false teaching within the church. These concerns do not seem to weigh heavily in any discussion I have been part of with those who advocate a change in the Church’s teaching. Of course we can all be mistaken; if that possibility can increase humility on all sides, could it not also help us to be patient.

Third, many times I hear an appeal to Romans 14 as the text for helping Christians disagree well. I do not think Romans 14 applies to questions of human sexuality, for a number of reasons, mainly because I cannot believe that St Paul who refers to same sex practice in Romans 1: 24-27 as being under the judgement of God, could by Romans 14 think it a matter indifferent. But even if Romans 14 does apply and the strong are those who want revision and the weak are those who insist on upholding the prohibitions of the law, according to Romans 14, the strong should be making allowance for the weak, which means there should be no pressing for change thereby injuring the consciences of the weak.

There are, no doubt, many other matters to be addressed in any patient reading, not least how we are to love those with whom we most passionately disagree and with whom we wonder “can we still walk together?”

The schism

The second reflection follows from the first. Given the chasm in the different readings of scripture, if the good trusting space for speaking honestly from the heart is overtaken by a political process I believe there will be schism in the Church of England.

Precisely because the different readings of scripture do not allow legitimacy to the other, if the matter is pressed, and people have to choose between “agreement” and “obedience”, many will choose “obedience”. The schism I have prayed against since consecration as Bishop in 2007 will happen, and the Church of England will experience, perhaps in a politer form, the rift seen in North America. I pray from my heart this will not happen. Those who will suffer most will be those who have not yet heard or believed the gospel, because the prayer for unity is so that the world may believe. And then the suffering of so many more because of what we cannot do if we are divided.

Returning to Oliver O Donovan’s book he has much to say on the subject of schism and none of it easy to read, but all of it salutary, especially in the light of the upcoming Primates meeting in January 2016, especially pages 28-34. I quote at some length

Disagreements, he says, *“are openings for those who share a common faith to explore and resolve important tensions within the context of communion.*

This kind of proposal is ..easy to mishear” and he goes on to say how. This is his conclusion page33

“every approach to resolving disagreements may turn out to fail. In the end God may have so hardened our hearts that we can see no way through our difficulties and simply find ourselves apart. God may in his judgement scatter a church that lacked the common will to search for its unity in the truth of the gospel. And then there may come a point at which this situation has to be given some kind of institutional expression. Nothing can exclude a priori the worst possibility that certain persons or groups, or even whole churches, may be declared to have left the communion of Jesus Christ. But it must be a declaration, a formal statement of what has come to pass. It cannot be an act to produce a result. The problem with the notion of separation is its expressive self-purifying character. It will not wait for God to purify his own church in his own time. Schisms may come, but woe to that church through whom they come! There is no right, or duty, of schism. As unity is given to the church as a gift, so it is taken away as a judgement. But on no account can disunity be a course of action that the church may embrace in pursuit of its mission or identity. The only justified breach is the one we have taken every possible step to avert, the one that lies on the far side of every conciliar process that can be devised”

Which I take to mean in the light of these conversations, if the attempted processes at conciliation have not worked, nationally and internationally, the church keeps looking for ways of finding a conciliar process that may work. At the end of O Donovan’s by no means favourable review of the Pilling process, thinking back to the St Andrew’s Day Statement of 1995 and the follow up discussion this provoked, he comments *“In 1997 some of us thought we saw a way forward. Were we simply deluded? Or is it simply that nobody wanted to take the time to follow a slower, more exploratory path?”*

If we compare our disagreements to the question of the ordination of women, it is asked *“could the church now follow the same path”*, were there not different readings of scripture then? This is true, there were differences, there still are. But if the comparison is to be pressed, there must be a look at how the Anglican Communion did wait, and explore, and find a way through in relation to the ministry of women. Scripture celebrates the equality of men and women, we are given examples of women in ministry and leadership in the Old and New testaments; supremely we have the Lord Jesus counter-culturally giving special honour to women. Nowhere in scripture is there a positive

commendation of same sex marriage that authorises the Church to recognise this development as of God. This remains the overwhelming assessment of past and present scholarship (see Martin Davie's "Studies on the Bible and same sex relationships since 2003" Gilead 2015) and is why most of the bishops of the Anglican Communion in the 1998 Lambeth Conference (resolution 1:10) expressed themselves opposed to this development, warning that pressing the matter would lead to schism. North American Anglicanism is now in schism because that process was refused. What will happen in England ?

The Love

My third reflection has me asking "Why Lord is this happening?" After the conversations, I with many other bishops of the Northern Province took part in an evangelistic mission in the diocese of Sheffield. It was a good experience with many open doors for the gospel and many faithful Christians seeking to pray and reach out to their communities. Why, I ask, has God opened these doors at just the moment the Church seems to be heading for ship wreck.

I have wondered if God is allowing this to happen to show us the meaning of love. There may be elements of judgement present too, but I believe that ultimately even judgement is an expression of divine love. Will we know what it is for God to love us, and will we know what it is to love one another. I have been reading 1 John during the summer, and "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). 1 John is a commentary on that love, weaving in the role of the commandments, the expulsion of sin from the life of the believer, and the call to love one another deeply so the world may believe.

For all my doubts about the conversations before they began, during and subsequent to the experience, I found the threefold listening (where three share personally and confidentially their own stories) to be profoundly moving and important. In one sense I have not progressed from those conversations which were at the core of the whole experience of the shared conversations, and I do not want to progress other than to know how each of us is loved by the Lord and how we might love one another more.

And this for me is the greatest difficulty and pain. I know how what I have said above will seem to those who long for their love and relationships to be welcomed and honoured by the Church. I have no wish to diminish anyone's giving or receiving of love, only to celebrate it, but within the gift of the love of the Lord that is behind and before and above and below and within us. I know that my call for a patient reading of scripture will seem like mere avoidance and a refusal to love. But I believe scripture to be a love letter even in its strictures that seem hard and restrictive, given for us to know the reality and presence of the divine love of the Father Son and Holy Spirit. We are God's community of love. He is the one who enables us to love, who shapes our love and refines our love. I believe those sisters and brothers in same sex relationships have nothing to fear from such love, even if it means accepting God's word that the place and glory of sexual union is to be found in heterosexual marriage.

The shared conversations opened me still more to the depth of love and pain in my brothers and sisters who pray for the Church to change her doctrine and discipline. Of my need to repent I am in

no doubt. The further I go on in these encounters before, during and after Pilling, the more sure I am that we all need to feel the force of Romans 1 taking us on to Romans 3:23 “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” and Romans 5:8 “But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us”. The St Andrew’s Day Statement said long ago “That the issue should have become so highly dramatised calls for repentance on the part of all members of the church. It suggests that the Gospel has not been directing the acts, words and thoughts of Christians on this subject.”

Our diocesan group was keen for the conversation to continue. So am I. If it was waiting to begin and has now hardly begun, could this be the place for the love that is patient and kind, in its continuation. 1 Corinthians 13 was rightly quoted at the end of our conversations. If the Church of England is anything like the church of Corinth in the first century, we surely need this love now more than ever; without it synodical resolutions will mean nothing.