

## **Luke 4:14-21** **After the Primates Meeting**

Just over a week ago the shadow leader of the House of Commons, a man called Chris Bryant, left the Church of England. He announced his decision on twitter

*I've finally given up on Anglican church today after its love-empty decision on sexuality.  
One day it will seem wrong as supporting slavery*

The Guardian carried the story the next day. The Guardian said this:

*The shadow leader of the House of Commons, who is gay and a former Anglican priest, made the statement after the US Episcopal church was barred from Church of England decision-making bodies*

The archbishops of the Anglican Communion had just announced some 'consequences' for the US Church because of its attitude to same sex marriage. And so, Chris Bryant quit the Church of England. I know all this because Mrs Hoyle read that *Guardian* story out to me. She did that because we both know Chris Bryant. He was indeed an Anglican priest; we trained at the same college, at the same time. I feel his frustration, sharply. I find that difficult. I have found recent conversations about why the Church of England does what it does quite difficult. Difficult, but important, and I think it is time I talked about it here. But because it is difficult, it will not surprise you that I am going to creep up slowly.

Watch and listen, the Dean is treading carefully. Listen for the egg shells.

Let's start with the gospel reading. St Luke, telling us about the very beginning of Christ's ministry; telling us that after his baptism Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit and

*he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up*

Now, this is Luke's gospel, the one that started in the Temple and keeps going back there. He is telling a very Jewish story and he has littered his story with quotation. Mary and Elizabeth quote scripture. When Simeon talks about 'a light to the nations' that is Isaiah. When John the Baptist preaches he cites Isaiah: 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord'. And, just before what we heard this morning, Luke had Jesus arguing with Satan in the wilderness. Everything Jesus said there was a quotation from the Old Testament. You get the idea. Luke understands that the gospel is fresh and new, but it is still the same story about the ways of God.

So now, Jesus comes to Nazareth. A visitor to the synagogue is asked to read. He reads Isaiah, 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me'. It is well known, this reading. In the synagogue they would have whispered it as he spoke the words,

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor... Luke 4:18*

Well known and electrifying, this is part of one of the great stories in the faith. Like the people seated in the synagogue that day we listen and wonder what is coming next.

*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives..., to let the oppressed go free...  
"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Luke 4:18,21*

It is wonderful, a manifesto of faith, a radical manifesto of faith.

Isaiah wrote those words long years before, wrote them for Jews in captivity in Babylon. He spoke to them about of liberty, 'liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound'. Isaiah promised them they would go home. And later they did go home. This is a promise God kept. Reading in Nazareth, to Jews bruised by Roman oppression, at odds with one another, and arguing about beliefs Jesus tells the great story again and promises them good news, liberty, the year of the Lord's favour.

And this morning that's the gospel, we announce the year of the Lord's favour in a church divided and ill at ease, a church a priest and politician calls *love empty*. And that's difficult.

Let me try to explain what has been happening. The churches of Anglican Communion are independent, they govern themselves. There is a secretary general of the Anglican Communion and there are Departments with staff, but it has all the power of a book group, anyone can decide they will just simply stop turning up. For years we have all thought that was about to happen. The only place there has been any conversation between our worldwide churches is in a the regular meeting of archbishops- the Primates meeting that has just ended.

Even before the primates met everyone was saying it would end in tears. The big issue is homosexuality. There are churches within the communion that think that homosexual activity is sinful. Some of those churches are in countries where homosexuality is considered criminal: Nigeria, Uganda and Kenya for example and some bishops are even accused of persecuting the gay community. In the United States meanwhile, in July, just after the Supreme Court legalized same sex marriage for all Americans, the General Convention of the church voted to change its definition of marriage and eliminated language defining marriage as between a man and a woman. When the primates met the agenda had lots of things on it, but this is what they were going to start with. Again, many of us assumed that it the conversation would be a disaster. There was talk of cars waiting with engines running.

They stayed. They stayed for a week (with one exception) and at the end of the week they issued a communique and told us that ECUSA, (the Anglican Church in the US) was barred from influence in the Communion for three years. Then, Chris Bryant quit the church and some of us had some difficult conversations.

And if I say 'this is difficult' I am off to a very bad start. If my daughter asks me about homosexuality and the church and I say 'It is difficult' she gets cross, and so she should, because she hears me say that I think homosexuality is difficult. And that is offensive.

So why do I still want to say this is difficult? It is difficult because we are none of us clear that we are talking about the same thing. These are just some of the things we are arguing about

1. Marriage can only be between a man and a woman
2. No one church can change the doctrine of marriage
3. Americans who have changed the doctrine of marriage must repent
4. Homosexuality is / or is not immoral?
5. People who have promoted the persecution of LGBTI people should repent

6. The debate about sexuality is/is not the most important argument in the church today.
7. Unity matters most / or unity matters less than sexual justice.

A letter was circulated to senior church leaders before the Primates meeting. It was a letter about the persecution of the gay community. I did not sign it. Does that mean I endorse persecution. No. I just think it was a deliberate attempt to make that issue into the agenda. Writing letters against persecution is a no brainer - sending them to the primates meeting tells them this is what you are discussing. They were not.

You can look at this mess, at this terrible mess, and you can say with absolute conviction. This is quite simple. It is about injustice done to gay people. You can say with Chris Bryant 'It is love empty'. You can even with him quit the church. And I think you might be right to do that. I think you can hear Christ's words in Nazareth and think that the gospel is liberation, freedom from oppression. You might be right.

But I am not quitting. The Primates have barred ECUSA. Is that a moral outrage? No it is not. ECUSA did something fairly radical and they have been slapped on the wrist. In fact they have banned from meetings for three years. It is legally unenforceable. So we have asked them not to come to meetings. If that is a punishment, bring it on.

The Primates Meeting has issued a communique it says this:

The traditional doctrine of the church in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds marriage as between a man and a woman in faithful, lifelong union. The majority of those gathered reaffirm this teaching.

They have agreed to disagree; the men (they were all men) who we were told would walk out did not walk out. They stayed; they thought they had to walk together. That is a staggering change of mind. That is the real interest in this meeting. The conversation is the place I will make my commitment. You see, I believe that, in the synagogue in Nazareth Jesus was preaching restoration, not liberation. He offered an old conviction that the promises of God hold good, that a whole people will be redeemed. He looked to us all coming home - restoration, not liberation. It is what the bible believes, that we have lost something we must recover.

That is slow, that is even sometimes shameful in its accommodations, but for the sake of those who we might ultimately bring with us I think we have to stay in this conversation. I will end with the words of an American Bishop, Michael Curry

*"I stand before you as your brother. I stand before you as a descendant of African slaves, stolen from their native land, enslaved in a bitter bondage, and then even after emancipation, segregated and excluded in church and society. And this conjures that up again, and brings pain. The pain for many will be real. But God is greater than anything. I love Jesus and I love the church. I am a Christian in the Anglican way. And like you, as we have said in this meeting, I am committed to 'walking together' with you as fellow Primates in the Anglican family."*