

May 12th - The Church and sexuality - our beliefs and where we get them

- our side - why are we here (and why are we in different places)

Matthew 12:1-14

Galatians 2:11-16

How we decide - Tradition

Matthew 12:1-14

Galatians 2:11-16

How does the church decide things - anyone know? Well in the early days Bishops or leaders wrote stuff - St Augustine, Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp - the church fathers. Later, when Constantine Roman Emperor converted, and he found people had different views, he brought Roman Order - so they held the first synod to try and agree a creed - it was in Nicea, so its called the Nicene Creed. There were 7 councils between 325 and 680, which defined which books were to be in the Bible and much else.

Time moved on.

But how would you decide if something was ok or not?

We heard in the letter to the Galatians - Peter is one time not eating with gentiles, then he does eat with them, and then he doesn't. And Paul has to remind him - its not these laws that save us, its faith in Jesus. You can never make yourself right by keeping the laws! Yet still the church obsess about laws, and wants to turn everything in the bible into a law.

But back to how would you decide? Would it be the Bible?

Well that's what Martin Luther said in the 16th century - Sola Scriptura!

Sounds so simple. Its in the Bible. But others in the reformation - Calvin, Zwingli, Cranmer - disagreed about what the Bible says. Some said it was ok to baptise babies and dead people, other said not.

It seems it was up to who was interpreting, or translating.

And also, what about stuff that's not in the Bible - it never says women can't be priests, it never says priests have to be unmarried. It never says communion has to be unleavened bread or weekly or anything.

So at the reformation, the Church of England was founded, and they quickly came up with a principle for deciding on doctrine. Scripture, Tradition and Reason - a 3 legged stool!

(The methodists added Experience as a 4th leg)

All 3 had to be in balance.

Process is really important. How we decide things is more important than the result.

Without a good process we all agree on what happens is that we argue from the result we want.

We say Christians should be pacifists - and argue it back to Jesus 'turn the other cheek'

Or we say there should be no women priests - and argue it to there are no women priests in the bible.

If we don't have good process we all argue back from the position we stand, to find whatever justifies it.

Scripture, Tradition and Reason is supposed to stop that.

So whatever we're thinking about we should be looking at Scripture, yes, but Balancing it with reason, and seeing what tradition has to say as well.

So We're looking at Scripture in a few weeks, and we'll look at Reason later, Today I want to look at Tradition

When I say - tradition, or traditional - you think - ah yes, the things we've always done.

Think of Christmas - full of tradition.

The tradition of an advent wreath, the tradition of a Christmas Tree, the tradition of cards.

And you can guess what I'm going to say -

Advent wreath - Moravian church introduction in 19th Century

Christmas tree and Cards - Victorian.

So in our hearts we say tradition to mean - we've always done it and it mustn't change

In our heads we know that it hasn't always been done, it was once new and different.

Just for funsies, I picked some things from church life that we traditionally did, or believed, which have changed:

Services must be in Latin

Standing only at services, then sitting on chairs, then pews

Music by small groups - Thomas Hardy style, then a tradition of organs, now guitars!

Women not allowed to speak, or lead, or hold position of responsibility

Denial of evolution and dinosaur evidence

Priests ok to marry, not ok to marry, then ok again

Ok to remarry after divorce, not ok to marry after divorce (ironic that was in the time of Henry 8th)

Then ok to remarry again

Ok to use contraception, then not ok, then ok again

And in doctrine and theology specifically -

There was a hierarchical view of God - God, archangels, angels, humans, animals, and our hierarchy mirrored heaven - king - aristocracy, peasants. - which must never be challenged.

The view of God as a blind watchmaker - a system fixed, and him not intervening.

The view of God giving us the world to exploit - its resources and its people, ie slaves

So things change... over time.

So when we say - the church has never done, or the church has always done.. its simply not true.

And ... to complicate or nuance further - there are many denominations - Catholic, Greek Orthodox, etc which do different things.

So Catholics unmarried clergy, Orthodox married clergy

Church of England communion weekly, Methodists - communion yearly

Church of England baptise children, Baptists - no baptising children

And while we agree or disagree about all of the above - yet we hold that we are all baptised into the same faith, that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ.

So if tradition is not keeping everything the same as it always was - and I'm glad if its not or we'd be speaking Aramaic, and wearing Palestinian clothes - what is it about?

Jesus saw the traditions of interpreting - keep the sabbath holy as a day of rest - and saw how it had been extended, how far someone could walk on the sabbath, were his disciples making bread by rubbing the corn, and he said - those traditions were fine for back then, but they've become really unhelpful.

You see tradition is not either or about any position.

Tradition is about how the church has fitted in with the world around it.

Its about sifting what's important and what's not important - what can change, and how much without losing our integrity.

Tradition is about being faithful to the history of the church, of our church, anglican, baptist or whatever - and seeing the decisions our predecessors made in the light of the knowledge and faith at the time they lived.

So we examine tradition, what it said, and why it said it, and what the spirit was behind it.

For example celibacy of Catholic clergy was brought in, as an option, so that the wouldn't be burdened by family life, or worried by how can I keep my family. But what was optional and good for then became something fixed and less than helpful.

We look at tradition in the light of our current doctrine and theology and bible.

There was a view that teh world was disposable, given to us to exploit but now we see God differently.

Here's the thing - there is no naked Christianity, no pure Christianity - christianity is lived out in teh world - it wears clothes. Jesus was not anyone, he was a 1st

century Palestinian. St James is not anywhere anytime - it is 2024 in Alderholt, a village in Dorset. How you live out Christianity in Addis Ababa, and how you live it in New York IS different - Christ does not change, but the church must wear him differently in each place and time.

Tradition then, to me, is like a flywheel.

If the church tries to speed off in a direction too quickly it holds us back, makes us go more slowly, considerately.

If we try to not move, to remain fixed, the flywheel nudges us forward.

It acts as a moderator, a leveller.

We are not the first to follow Christ, we stand on the shoulders of those before, and we see farther than they did. And we live in a different time. So we examine our traditions with prayer and thoughtful consideration.

And there's always Scripture and Reason to guide us as well.