

Silence is not neutral – Cathedral, 11 March 2018

Some years ago I spent part of my sabbatical leave staying with the Franciscan Brothers in San Francisco. One day the house was otherwise empty and the phone rang, so I thought I had better take a message. The voice on the other end said, sonorously, “This is Desmond Tutu speaking”. Honestly, the voice might as well have said “This is God speaking”.

This memorable little incident came to mind when I was doing some reading around the subject of Organizing for Change (for reasons which will become obvious). In regard to this, Desmond Tutu, in addressing apartheid – or any other discriminatory legislation – said “*If you are neutral in situations of oppression, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.*” Very similarly, Elie Wiesel, who survived the Nazi Holocaust, said “*We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented*”.

These words encourage me to talk about a decision made by a special Synod of the Diocese of Christchurch that you may be aware of, as it attracted some media coverage. After Nelson Diocese, Christchurch may reasonably be considered the most conservative Pakeha diocese.

So I was pleased but somewhat surprised to learn that they have voted quite convincingly in support of the report of the Motion 29 Working Group which, nearly two years ago, was charged by the General Synod with the task of coming up with a structure that would enable the church (particularly Tikanga Pakeha) to remain together despite irreconcilable differences over the matter of the blessing by the church of same-sex civil unions or legal marriages.

I'm not going to labour the contents of the report – you can easily find it on the Anglican Taonga website*. Suffice to say that it recommends allowing a network of parishes which choose to actively discriminate against such relationships to form a kind of community of interest. In return it allows bishops to authorise an appropriate service for use in their diocese providing the vestry agrees to such blessing services. No one (the bishop included) is compelled either way.

When I have raised this subject in sermons before I've been aware that for some this topic is already settled so why do I need to bang on about it? "We've moved on" might be such a response.

Absolutely, mostly.

I can testify that society has moved on, well and truly. Wherever we've lived, town and country, we've been included as part of the local community – parties, meals, just being good neighbours. It's just not been a thing.

And of course civil society provides for equal rights in every respect, which has been a catalyst for positive social change.

When I've preached on this matter in other churches I've had a literal queue of people afterwards wanting to tell me about their friend, their family member, their ex.

But unfortunately the institution of the Anglican Church has not moved on. At all. The most that you can say is that the virulent homophobic remarks of last century's synodical patriarchy (in the main) are no longer tolerated, and that the Church did manage to issue a meaningless apology for the way in which LGBT+ people have been treated. I say meaningless because no amount of handwringing brings any actual legislative change.

To be plain, as things currently stand, Bishop Andrew could be the subject of an official complaint regarding his licensing of persons not in a heterosexual marriage, even though married in the eyes of the law. So that means that myself and one other senior priest in this Diocese could find ourselves on the scrapheap. But we have taken that risk, as has our bishop (and hats off to him).

In John's Gospel we read:

"For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God." (John 3:20-21)

What I think needs to come into the light and be clearly seen is that even if this motion is passed as it currently stands, it offers no protection for licensed clergy, even though it would allow for the blessing of relationships. This is deeply unsatisfactory and actually offensive and dangerous.

My hope is that General Synod will have the courage to go further towards some kind of real equality and not choose to sacrifice LGBT+ people on the altar of some spurious unity. As Elie Weisel said “*We must take sides*”, and “*Silence always encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.*”

You can be sure that when I attend General Synod in May I will (given the opportunity) be speaking up for real change and a church that still has some hope of being relevant to the wider society.

I will have more to say soon on the question of this kind of acquiescent silence but for now I want to place something of a challenge before you all.

In the reasonable likelihood of Motion 29 passing the Cathedral parish will have the opportunity to petition the Bishop for permission to utilise a service of blessing for a relationship which he authorises – and I don't think I am taking too much of a punt when I assume he will choose such an authorization.

What this means is that as a Cathedral we will have to decide what we want to say by way of welcome to LGBT+ people who are seeking God's blessing on their commitment. It's not something we can be silent about. And I think, further, that we will need to be in partnership with other open and affirming parishes here in Waiapu and, for example, the Diocese of Auckland.

I encourage those church officers who are elected today to consider carefully what our way forward (God and the church willing) might look and sound like after General Synod in May, because I look for a church which is a beacon of hope for all the community.

- Ian Render

