

In the final report of the previous Doctrine Commission, *Being Human*,² it was argued that Anglicanism should be seen as “a wisdom tradition for the twenty-first century” (p.7). Central to this is the understanding that “Wisdom is not primarily about accepting certain conclusions. It is about the habits of individuals and communities. These habits of mind, heart, imagination and will can help us, in the ever-changing circumstances of our lives, to find a wisdom that is in line with the purposes of God” (p.12). The report recognizes that wisdom can be acquired and expressed in many ways, but argues that, from a Christian perspective, “the ‘how’ of learning wisdom has to have at its heart the interpretation of Scripture” (p.12). Since this concern with wisdom, rooted in the interpretation of Scripture, is basic to LLF, we need to ask how this in-principle approach might best be realized in the specifics of current concerns with issues of sex and sexuality.

One of the presenting issues is the appropriateness of same-sex marriage within the Anglican Communion. Currently, the Church of England has people who reject same-sex marriage as incompatible with Scripture and Christian tradition; it has those who accept it as compatible; it also has people in between who are genuinely uncertain about what best to do. This range of stances is reflected in the Anglican Communion as a whole; and in other Christian traditions also. This presenting issue, however, is the tip of an iceberg in terms of the current context, where there is a range and diversity of sexual practices and identities that is unprecedented in the history of human culture. It follows that probably the most honest thing to say at the outset is that we (Christians in the CoE) do not know what to make of what is going on in our culture. We’re not the only ones who don’t really know what’s going on; but insofar as we are a national institution with an obligation to articulate and practise and enable norms for human life under God, there is a particular pressure on us to “say something” and “do something”. So what should we say and do, when in certain important senses we don’t know what to say and do?

The extensive testimony, literature and practice of gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians in recent years creates a prima facie case for some change in public Christian practice. To be sure, some Christians are unpersuaded that any change is appropriate, or, if there is to be change, what form it might best take. But there has already been change in the acceptance of civil partnerships, celibate for ordinands and clergy but not necessarily celibate for lay people. Moreover it is hard even for those traditionally inclined, if they genuinely engage with both the people and the literature, to come away unmoved and

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² *Being Human: A Christian Understanding of Personhood illustrated with Reference to Power, Money, Sex and Time* (London: Church House Publishing, 2003).

unrecognizing that in significant respects things have changed from how they were fifty years ago. Faithful committed Christians make the case for same-sex relationships in way that used not to happen. To recognize this is not necessarily to agree. But it is to recognize that what counts as Christian wisdom may in some ways be changing.

The Church's deep rootedness in a long history can easily make it somewhat more at home, so to speak, with understandings and norms of the past than with the changing circumstances of the present, especially when much of that past culture was Christianly-oriented and Christianly-constituted in a way that is no longer the case. One corollary of this is that the Church is often in danger of being somewhat defensive in relation to cultural change, in ways that can come over as simply out-of-touch or at least as constantly on the back foot. To be sure, this is not always a bad thing. The Church may have a role in testing and scrutinizing developments that is of value for the wider culture, and which may not be carried out so readily elsewhere in the culture. Nonetheless, there is a danger that the Church is seen to be, and may actually be, less a cutting-edge context for articulating and practising ways of leading human life and culture in better directions through a living hope in God than a rather grudging participant in contemporary culture, foot-dragging and suspicious rather than being nimbly on our toes.

In short, our quest for a wisdom that is rooted in the interpretation of Scripture not only requires fidelity to the given content of Christian faith. It also requires creativity in grasping what that content might mean in a changed and changing world. And a good starting point is an honest recognition of our limited understanding of what is currently going on. This means that there must be a greater-than-usual provisionality about any proposals we come up with. We must decide what makes best sense for us here and now, in a way that does not prejudge what will necessarily be the case in other places and in the future.

So what might Scripture offer us? Elsewhere in LLF we have a detailed study of those biblical passages which handle same-sex issues. This concludes that there is no clear fit or match between that of which the biblical writers disapprove and that which advocates for faithful and stable same-sex partnerships propose. The biblical texts of disapproval remain on the table, as it were, as part of Scripture; yet the result of careful study is that it is unsafe to suppose that these passages in themselves are a sufficient guide to what the CoE should, or should not, do today. We must also look elsewhere in Scripture for guidance. Rather than attempting here to articulate a specific moral theology/Christian ethic in relation to sex and marriage, a task undertaken elsewhere in LLF material, Scripture can provide us with resources for thinking freshly about our overall stance and approach.

Blessing is a core concept and practice in both Old and New Testament, and has a long and rich history in the life of the Church. The biblical understanding of blessing may offer us a fruitful way ahead.

The opening chapter of the book of Genesis, the overture for the Bible as a whole, depicts God's attitude towards His world as one of delight ("good... good... very good"). This divine delight is given verbal form through God's act of blessing. Every kind of animate life that comes into being on the fifth and sixth days of creation – from great sea monsters, via birds and beasts, to humanity (all creatures that breathe and move, as distinct from vegetation) – is blessed by God; *all* are blessed (Gen. 1:22, 28). Although the blessing goes closely with a concern that animate life should "be fruitful and multiply" and "fill the earth", the blessing does not appear to be restricted to a concern for fruitful procreation, at least not in the sense of creatures just replicating and surviving. Rather, the procreation is the necessary condition for life not only to survive but also to flourish in such a way that the earth is populated and thereby able to realize its Creator's purposes for it. Thus blessing expresses God's intrinsic goodwill towards the created order, the divine desire for its flourishing.

In addition to the blessing of animate life, God also blesses time, the seventh day, which is a space distinct from that of the week of "work", a space where, by implication, life can rest and be, after the pattern of its Creator (2:1-3). There is thus a clear sense that part of the blessing of animate life relates to life having a particular context which will contribute to the realization of that blessing. Although this creational blessing of the seventh day clearly anticipates the Sabbath, a designated day of rest, it encourages thought about other possible contexts that will enable God's blessing on creation to be realized.

When the opening portrayal of the world as a whole in Genesis 1-11 narrows to a particular focus on Abraham and his descendants, the keynote again is divine blessing (Gen. 12:1-3). Not only are Abraham and his descendants to be blessed by God. They are also to be a model of that blessing to which others also can aspire (i.e. "May God make you like Abraham/Israel", as when the elderly Jacob blesses Jacob's sons and says, "By you Israel will invoke blessings, saying, God make you like Ephraim and like Manasseh", Gen. 48:20). The wording can also be seen to envisage Abraham and his descendants being a means of conveying blessing to other people on earth (as when Paul reads this passage, in conjunction with Genesis 15:6, as indicating that "the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you'", Gal. 3:6-8).

Strikingly, even if God's blessing is primarily to be realized through Abraham's son Isaac and his descendants, it is not restricted to them. For God's blessing is given also to Ishmael and his descendants (Gen. 17:20), even though Ishmael will not only be on the margins of the main storyline but will also be problematic in such contributions as he makes: "He will be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin" (Gen. 16:12). There is a remarkable generosity here when God extends blessing even to the one whose descendants will create problems. Apparently God's blessing does not necessarily entail a quiet life for everyone!

Blessing

A human practice of speaking blessing on God's behalf is also regularized within the life of Israel. Regular pronouncement of blessing upon the people of Israel is to be one of the prime responsibilities of Aaron and his sons, i.e. the priesthood (Num. 6:22-27) – a practice that has of course been continued within Christian faith. This famous passage gives the fullest explicit articulation of the meaning and implications of blessing:

“The LORD bless you and keep you,
the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace”.

Alongside “bless” we find “keep” (i.e. guard, protect), “be gracious” (i.e. show mercy and goodness) and “give peace” (i.e. grant stability and space), all in the context of the Lord's face looking on and “shining” (presumably a divine form of smiling!). It is a rich articulation of God's being “for” his people (*pro nobis*).

In the New Testament there is also a generosity of outlook prescribed for those who follow Christ. Paul enjoins Christians to “bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them” (Rom. 12:14), thereby prescribing both attitude and action in continuity with the words of Jesus, “bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Lk. 6:28). This is not just a matter of refraining from wanting harm to come to those who are hostile in opposition (a ready instinct for most of us). Jesus and Paul both envisage Christians actively and prayerfully engaging with God, that what is good for these people should come to them from God (without prescribing what form that should take).

There is an important and constructive tension in the portrayal of blessing as a whole in the Bible. On the one hand, it represents the sovereign and gracious initiative of God towards creation. On the other hand, there are passages which speak of blessing being received in the covenantal context of human obedience to God (Deut. 28:1-14). This tension between “God sovereignly blesses” and “God blesses those who are obedient” is not something to be resolved, but articulates some of the dimensions of love, where love is both unconditionally given and love only thrives when there is mutuality and responsiveness. The tension between grace freely given, and the need for trusting and obedient responsiveness in relation to it, runs through Scripture as a whole.

In a culture where we do not know how best to handle developments in sexual identities and practices, anything we decide to do must be provisional. In general, changes in Christian practice may appropriately be made subject to the proviso that they must be received in the life of the church – and are thus in principle able to be revoked if unanticipated difficulties arise. Nonetheless this provisionality need not be at odds with the desire to affirm God's goodwill towards people through blessing.

The role of blessing in Scripture offers a possible outlook and pattern for the church today. In general terms, Christians who trust and hope in God's good purposes for creation can appropriately reflect that in their dealings with each other and with society generally in seeking to affirm God's blessing on those around them. Discernment of problems and warning against folly remain part of the Christian vocation, but not at the cost of muting God's fundamental desire to bless. In a society where in important ways we don't understand what's going on, it is as important to discern what is good in new developments and to affirm God's goodwill for those struggling to articulate and practise different modes of living, as it is to warn of possibly unrecognized difficulties. Pastoral accommodation to changing developments is a recognized historic feature of the church's life.

So how might this make a specific difference to practice in relation to the desire for recognition and affirmation of same-sex relationships on the part of gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians? The current situation is that there is acceptance of same-sex civil partnerships. It is usually thought that the alternative to this is same-sex marriage, as is now legal and practised in British society generally. However, might some formal rite of blessing of covenant partnerships be appropriate instead?

One drawback of same-sex marriage is that it arguably "normalizes" same-sex relationships too quickly, without asking whether there is any particular gift, or indeed blessing, that same-sex couples, as same-sex couples, might contribute to church and world. Same-sex partnerships are such a recent development, relatively speaking, that it is too soon to say what their long-term significance and contribution might, or might not, be. The laws of our society have already redefined marriage both substantively, as a relationship and institution no longer intrinsically oriented towards the procreation of children as the fruit of the relationship (whatever the complexities and qualifications in practice), and terminologically, by making the terms "husband" and "wife" no longer correlative to each other. If the issue is not just whether the church should redefine its doctrine of marriage, but rather whether it should look for some distinctive gift in same-sex relationships as same-sex relationships, then the option of preserving a distinction between marriage and same-sex covenant partnerships may at least be considered. A same-sex couple would observe the same moral and spiritual disciplines as heterosexual couples, but with a different dynamic, with the precise outworking to be a matter of conscience. A formal blessing of the relationship as a covenant partnership would express the sense that there is at least provisional wisdom in recognizing the signs of grace in same-sex relationships, that are not marriage, but do not require celibacy either (other than on the terms that it is required for heterosexual people).