

A Sermon preached at St Mary's, Warwick 2nd Sunday before Lent 2012

It was widely reported this week that comedian Tim Vine (brother of broadcaster Jeremy Vine) has once again won an award for joke of the year. His winning one-liner this time was: "conjunctivitis.com – that's a site for sore eyes." A previous winning joke of his was: "crime in multi-storey car parks. That is wrong on so many levels." Those give a flavour of the quick-fire, punning humour that's his stock in trade. Ironically, Tim's probably best known on TV as playing the straight man to Lee Mack in the BBC series *Not Going Out*. He's also a Christian and has been known to play the drums in his church.

So it's interesting to contrast the positive reporting in the media of Vine's achievements with those of that other Christian body in the news this week – The Church of England's General Synod. It's fair to say, those commenting on the debate about women bishops, have expressed a degree of befuddlement – almost as if the Church of England was suffering from conjunctivitis and an inability to see clearly. One newspaper had an experienced parliamentary reporter at Synod but even he struggled to make sense of Anglican politics, writing: 'Even without the disconcerting references to loving each other, which never happens at Westminster, Wednesday's debate was not easy to follow. Sentamu's speech was passionate, funny and largely incomprehensible.' By mapping the debate onto the political world he achieved some clarity but then struggled to make sense again as various *female* speakers stood to argue the case against *women* bishops.

So what's going on here? It's tempting to see the discussion as one about rights, equality and discrimination but this is a misleading cul-de-sac. Those who're *outside* the Church looking in, tend to see the debate in these terms because they're seeing the matter through secular lenses where similar discussions continue in the workplace, politics, arts and elsewhere. But there's *also* a significant group of opponents to women bishops who like to frame the debate in these terms because they can then casually dismiss the call for women's ministry as something which is only inspired by developments *outside* the Church. At the risk of labouring the analogy, in the same way that there are various causes of conjunctivitis – viral, bacterial or an allergic reaction – so there are various causes behind the Church's drawn-out debate about women bishops and they are theological, structural and psychological.

Psychological conjunctivitis is caused by the fact that many of us don't like change. It makes us feel uncomfortable; potentially it has no boundaries so we don't know where it will end once it starts *and* it can make us fearful. Any form of change can be threatening, even if deep down we believe it's necessary. This is a 'given' which cannot be cured. It can only be managed with care and support wherever it's found.

Structural conjunctivitis is built into the Church of England's organisational DNA. Andrew Brown, who contributes a weekly press review to the *Church Times*, wrote a column in a national paper before this meeting of Synod headed: *General Synod – the perfect forum for Anglicans who want to avoid decisions*. He admits that he's a great procrastinator, so he can see it clearly in others and observes: 'Some Christian churches can't make decisions because they don't have decision-making bodies. The Baptists are the best example of this. Some can't make big decisions because they think that all the interesting ones were made by about 787 AD – that would be the Orthodox. The Roman

Catholics don't believe in democracy as a form of church government, but the Church of England can't even decide whether it wants to make decisions' (*The Guardian*, 6th Feb 2012). Brown's view maybe cynical but has an element of truth. The Church of England is an ancient organisation that's placed a good deal of its power in the hands of local churches, which makes it very difficult to get any strategic energy from those with an overall perspective. That's why this debate has meandered in the way it has and we might wish this wasn't the case but, again, this form of conjunctivitis is something we have to live with and manage.

At this stage, our hearts and minds might be at a low ebb. If the psychological and structural manifestations are incurable what price that most deep rooted problem: theological conjunctivitis? In fact, this is where things are at their most interesting and dynamic. There's been a great deal of invigorating thought given to the nature of ministry in all its forms and in all parts of the Church in recent years. Catholic, Anglican and Reformed churches have all taken this matter seriously and worked hard at looking at the foundations of ministry, together with what we then build on those foundations.

The foundation for the Church's ministry is Jesus' own ministry, which is shared by all followers. So at the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel all are called to share in Jesus authority and proclaim the good news: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations* (Mt 28 18b-19a). The foundation for priestly ministry is Jesus own *priesthood* which is set out most clearly in the Epistle to the Hebrews, especially in that well known verse: *Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession* (Heb 4: 14). That *confession* is in the One who stands with all of us and we all stand with Jesus' sharing in his high priesthood – since *there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus* (Gal 3:38) as the Apostle Paul observes in his Letter to the Galatians.

Theologically and Biblically the ministry of Jesus and the priesthood of Christ is shared by the whole body of the Church. Out of that body, that priesthood of all believers, some are called and ordained for certain priestly tasks but only perform those tasks on the basis of the shared priesthood. And then out of that body of ordained priests others are called to be bishops but that ministry too is based on the shared ministry of all – male and female.

So, theological conjunctivitis can be put right because the ordination of women as bishops is not about equal rights, it's about something that's at the heart of the Gospel – we all share in the ministry of Jesus and the priesthood of Christ. Structural conjunctivitis is more difficult because the Church of England is as it is. There are other ways of structuring but are they any better? We could ask the NHS, for instance, whether top-down strategies are really all they're cracked up to be. And finally, the solution to psychological conjunctivitis lies with us and how we handle our fear of change. And there we (individually and collectively) need to hold onto to the crucial promise that Jesus came to banish all our fears.

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