

‘What must I do to inherit eternal life?’

Jesus answered, as he so often did, with a question.

‘What is written in the law?’

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’

And Jesus said ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

One of the imperatives often proposed for Christian evangelism is that it saves souls. This idea is commonly linked with a particular set of beliefs, beliefs with a very firm boundary. Stray beyond those boundaries and you had better watch out.

In this story, as he does elsewhere, Jesus firmly and absolutely rejects this analysis. Love is the key to eternal life.

In this parable he is helping his questioner to see for himself that a Samaritan, someone normally considered to be somewhere at the bottom of the heap in terms of getting to heaven, has fulfilled all that is necessary to inherit eternal life.

This was the man that loved his neighbour.

For a good devout Jew at the time this must have seemed like heresy. Samaritans did not have the right set of beliefs. It couldn't be so. Yet Jesus says the unsayable and through story enables the listener to come to this conclusion himself.

Elsewhere in the gospels Jesus is even more shocking, saying that tax collectors and prostitutes will get to heaven before some of the pious and religious.

Ever since its somewhat shaky start, the Church of England has been split between the puritans and the Catholics. Deeply held beliefs caused people to become

adversarial to the point of wishing to see each other destroyed; unimaginably terrible things were done to those deemed to be heretics. In our vestry we have a copy of a picture of Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley being burnt at the stake (although the picture is in fact historically inaccurate).

How can people get so animated about doctrine that they kill each other in such appalling ways? Because it goes to the very heart of what we believe is the nature of God.

Christians study the bible, but this library of books by different authors does not give a monochromatic view of God. So, we read it, we pray about it, and in the light of tradition and reason we come to a conclusion. The trouble is, it is not always the same conclusion as our fellow Christian.

There are therefore two very pressing questions – how do we as Christians all get along together? and, even more importantly, what is the nature of God?

I have been pondering this with more than usual energy because a couple of weeks ago I was accused (by another member of the Anglican clergy) of *(and I quote)* ‘poisoning people’s minds with my heresies’. I was told that this Parish was in urgent need of a Christian presence.

My heresy is that I do not oppose gay marriage.

I am not a campaigner on this issue, in fact it is something I don’t feel particularly strongly about one way or the other. But I do feel very strongly about my belief in God.

Initially, I found myself retreating into my own corner, like a boxer waiting for the next round. But that is not where I want to be, nor where I think I should be. This is a miniature example of the scale of the conflict which currently exists at the heart of the Church of England, and is exemplified by the continual turmoil over sexuality and gender.

Can the church accommodate such a wide range of views?

I would like to think that the answer is yes. But how?

It could continue as it does at present, with different factions snarling at each other from their respective positions at Synod. That isn't satisfactory and more important it clearly isn't Christian.

An alternative would be that those of opposing doctrines could engage in bible study together with the aim of coming to a common conclusion. That is clearly a high risk strategy for all of us, for what is at stake is our whole understanding of the nature of God.

You might argue that that is the whole point, and nothing could be more important than the exploration of this core truth. But doing it together, on the issues that divide us, would require an openness to change on all sides. If I were entering into this it would mean that I had to be open to the idea that God was not as generous in his welcome into his kingdom as I currently believe, that perhaps it is true that sinners and unbelievers are condemned to hell for all eternity.

If I am honest to myself, I would have to admit that I would only engage in such a study because I believe that I am right and am determined not to change. I am equally sure that a conservative evangelical would enter into it in the same frame of mind. So before we even begin it is doomed to failure.

So what about just ignoring the differences and working with the common ground? This is more hopeful, but is not without its problems. The trouble is, if you genuinely believe (as an example) that all atheists are going to hell, then you have a moral imperative to save them and anyone who stands in the way of that is by definition evil, for they are causing damnation. There is an internal logic to it, but this also leaves no room at all for dialogue.

You might think that a story such as the good Samaritan would be non-controversial, but the reality is that there is very little that Jesus said or did that was not challenging to us today (let alone to those who heard it for the first time).

It is a story that I have preached about many many times. Usually the theme I have taken is that we should be like the Samaritan, helping even those that despise us. That is challenging enough. But when we look at it through the lens of the question “Who goes to heaven?” it is even harder. I have read it and reread it, and the message is clear. The Samaritan fulfilled the criteria for eternal life.

Since I am sure that the Holy Spirit can speak to us through Scripture, how does this story move the church forward from its current impasse?

Jesus seems to want to prevent us from stereotyping people. Not all Levites are good. not all Samaritans bad. We should not be so quick to leap to judgement on others.

On the other hand he does want us to love each other and not just those who are like ourselves or those with whom we agree. In this context, we must also (however hard) love the Levite as well as the Samaritan.

So somehow, we have to learn to work alongside and love other Christians, even when their views are very different to our own. That is as much a challenge for those who like me see themselves as “liberals” as it is for those who are Anglo-Catholic, or for those who are conservative evangelicals. It requires us to put aside our differences, to be generous, caring, to show mercy. And if necessary, that has to be unilateral. We must do it even if we are not met half way.

And because sometimes (perhaps often?) we will fail in this, and sometimes we will get back in to the boxing ring, we must continue to study and pray.

As Paul and Timothy prayed for the church in Colossus, so too must we pray for the church and for all fellow Christians.

With God all things are possible and it is possible that we can overcome these differences. What gives me hope is the history from the churches in and around Los Angeles in the 1980s. Marilyn McCord Adams was at that time a priest in Hollywood. A biblical scholar, from a conservative background, she and many others found that members of their congregation were dying. It was the beginning of AIDS and at that time there was no treatment. It was a pastoral crisis on a massive scale. The clergy got together. They had strongly held views, as different as those causing problems in the Church of England, but they had to respond pastorally. They spent hours in studying scripture and praying together. They found a way to work together that created a mutual respect, an acknowledgment that we can never fully understand the nature of God, but that all that is needed is that we respond to him and to each other in love.

That is the way forward. To respond to God and to each other in love. Amen.