

SERMON FOR PRIDE 2023

First thank you to the Dean for this opportunity to say a few words during this Pride Evensong marking Pride Week 2023.

I also want to thank Mark Bowyer and the committee for the honour of appointing me as a Patron of Changing Attitude Ireland. It is indeed a privilege and an honour to work alongside you for the full inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community in the Church.

The Gospel appointed for this Sunday's second service is Luke 41: 12-24. The theme is hospitality.

The context of the reading is that Jesus was invited to a meal by one of the learned-elite, a Pharisee. But Jesus as he could be turned out to be a rather awkward guest. Looking at his fellow guests he asks, "Why is this such an in-group". Its easy to invite your friends. They will you back. Keep it to the in crowd of the like-minded.

No said Jesus!

But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.' (v 13-14)

Here Jesus smashes the "us and them" mentality, prevalent in all societies at all times, then and now. Your rich, influential and privileged lives will be blessed when you share company with those who have nothing to give you but themselves, their experience and their story. You will learn from them so much what you could never learn from people like yourself. We learn from those who are different. Jesus invites powerful to be transformed by inviting the vulnerable, the outsiders, the powerless to eat at the same table. Jesus mission is to subvert the power of oppression by the power of love. Jesus still subverts human power dynamics by inviting one and all to eat at the same eucharistic table.

One of the most important lessons I learnt during my training for the ministry was the title of an essay I was required to write. A Persons greatest need is for someone to listen.

I had the opportunity to lead a weekend for new members of the Corrymeela community. The first part we drew out the time-line of our lives, the good above the line and the bad below the time line. The second part was sharing our stories, no one was forced to say anything they didn't want to say, it was space for people to share who they were, and be listened to with attention and respect. At the end of the weekend one of the group a successful business woman, this has been a wonderful experience, "Never in my life have I been given 20 mins to tell other people who I am."

Genuine hospitality, like Jesus pointed us to, is opening ourselves to the reality of those who are different.

I am impressed that 40 years after the first Pride March in Dublin in 1983, that members of the LGBTQ+ community are sharing their stories for all to read in Irish papers, and those stories today, command the honour and respect for who they

SERMON FOR PRIDE 2023

represent and that yesterday's March was something that could be celebrated by everyone.

There is no doubt that we have come a long way from 1983 when as Una O'Malley reminded us Declan Flynn, on 8th March 83 was beaten to death in Fairview Park, by a group of young men who perceived him to be gay and were handed suspended sentences.

There is much to **celebrate** but there is still much to **remember** and still much to **protest** about. In our world life is getting tougher for those who are gay. Uganda has introduced the Death Penalty for what they call aggravated homosexuality, and across the United States, 70 new anti-LGBTQ+ laws have been introduced so far this year. There is much to protest about.

But I continue to be troubled by the story John Bell, the well-known hymn writer from the Iona Community, told us at a fringe meeting at General Synod some years ago. Lizzie was 14 and grew up in the local church. She was convinced Christian, a member of the sea scouts, all looked well for her and for her future. It was a shock to all when she committed suicide in a park near to her home. Three months after her death, at the inquest, it was discovered that shortly before she committed suicide, she sent a tweet to a friend in which she said "I don't believe that God can love me the way I am." Somehow the way the Church is, and the attitudes it holds communicated to Lizzie that being a Lesbian meant she was alienated from God's love. She was NOT OK. And for Lizzie it was unbearable to accept that God didn't love her! How did it happen?

All too easily I'm afraid. It was a normal 'caring' Church. They didn't notice that the message they were giving to Lizzie, that she heard so loud and clear, was **it is not OK to be Gay**. How many other stories of rejection and discrimination are to be found in the experience of gay Christians? Far, far too many.

I sat on the Church of Ireland "Commission on human sexuality in the context of Christian Belief." I prefer the Sex Committee! During that Commission we invited a wide range of groups to address the Commission including members of the LGBTQ+ community. They were listened to. Most on the Commission felt we had done our job to include their input. But were they heard? I don't know. It is not for the listeners to decide if a person has been listened to. It is the person sharing their story who knows if they have been listened to.

Today there is a reluctance within Church community to hear from the LGBTQ+ community. Why? Because to listen will open the possibility of change. And change demands taking a risk, a risk of disturbing the status quo. And because this issue is tearing the Anglican Communion apart. Because if we open the topic again we will be at each other's throats. Let sleeping dogs lie, please!

But I say. What about Lizzie? As a gay friend of mine reminds me Full inclusion of Gay people in the Church isn't an issue. "This is my life you are talking about." He would say.

And why is it what those who are the most vulnerable, those who suffer discrimination, those who are made to feel they have to apologise for who they are, why is it that THEY alone must fight for their right to exist, to be safe, to be free!

SERMON FOR PRIDE 2023

In our Gospel reading Jesus encourages his followers to widen our hospitality to the outsider, the vulnerable, to the LGBTQ+ community. It is Jesus who said, This do in remembrance of me. Accept my hospitality, gather round my table whoever you are, because I have invited you. As we gather at the invitation of the host, who gave his life for the outsider, the stranger, the ungodly so that in response to Love they would draw close and join the transformational community of followers of Jesus whose primary task is to share the news of God's love in this broken world.

For those of you who are members of the LGBTQ+ community who have stuck with the Church, despite all, thank you. We need you. We don't deserve your love and care but we still have so far to travel, to be a community that represents the unity that is God's desire. We need to listen to your story. To really listen, not just with the head but with the heart. Come sit at table with us as together we meet with our host Jesus Christ. As together we seek to be inspired and transformed by his love for us and his world.

*Bishop Trevor Williams
Dublin*