

Poles Apart?

A Lent Study on the tensions that divide us from each other.



SESSION 1

Over the centuries Christians have had to deal with differences; sometimes they have managed to stay together, sometimes they haven't.

During these Lent sessions we'll be looking at some of the issues which tend to divide people from one another, in the church, but also in other groups – workplaces, families, local communities or globally.



Introductory activities – Where do you stand?

“Truth” vs. Unity

Read John 17

This passage is Jesus' prayer on the night before he died, according to the writer of John's Gospel. We don't know what Jesus' actual words were, but this is what the author imagines him praying, based on the tradition he has inherited (John's Gospel was written some time between 80- 100 AD.)

- Jesus prays, “that they may be one” vs. 11. Why do you think the author thinks this is what Jesus wanted?
- It is also important to Jesus that his followers are “sanctified in the truth” vs. 19 . What do you think this means?
- What are the positive benefits of being united?
- Is unity sometimes a bad thing to aim for? Why?

- Can you recall times in your own life when you have had to go against the crowd, or against people who you would normally have tried to fit in with?
- What happened and how did you feel about it?
- Looking back, do you think you were right, or just being awkward?
- Are there times when it is right to try to prevent people expressing their opinion (holocaust deniers? Muslim extremists?) or should we have complete freedom of speech?

The Anglican Communion (the group of churches which share a common heritage in the Church of England) is currently deeply divided over issues like the ordination of women and homosexuality. Some provinces (national Churches) want to expel others from the Communion. Part of the argument centres around what it means to be a Communion – should we all have to follow the same rules on moral issues, for example?

- Do you think it is more important that we stay together, even if that means “fudging” the issues, or would it be better to split up?
- What would we gain and lose if we split up?
- What is it about the Church of England which you value and wouldn't want to lose?

TO REFLECT ON DURING THE WEEK

At the beginning of this session, which side of the debate do you think you would have favoured? What is the baby that you might throw out with the bathwater – the opposing truth which you might miss?

Session 2

Tradition vs. Innovation

Matthew 13.52:

And Jesus said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'

- What lessons has life has taught you?
- Who or what was the biggest influence on you when you were growing up?
- In what ways is your life different from your parents' lives?

Imagine you were filling a knapsack with the things that a child might need over their lifetime. What kind of things would you want to put in it? (Stories, prayers, ideas, values, music...)

Read:

Proverbs 4 & Deuteronomy 6.4-9

Passing on traditional wisdom from one generation to another was very important to the Jewish people.

- What were the things they thought should be passed on?
- How did they pass them on?
- How do we pass on the things which are important to us?

Read:

Gal 1. 6- 24, 3.23-4.7

One of the accusations levelled against Jesus was that he was changing the message which the Jewish people had treasured over the centuries.

Paul struggled to reconcile the old and new in his ministry. He did not want to reject his inheritance, and yet he could see that following Jesus challenged some parts of it.

The letter to the Galatians is one of the earliest Christian documents we have. It was written by Paul to a group of churches in Asia Minor

(modern Turkey) around 50 AD in response to arguments that are going on there.

- From the information we have here, what are they arguing about?
- Try to imagine the justification each side gives for its position.
- Imagine you are part of this community and on the receiving end of this letter. Imagine yourself on each side of the argument – how does Paul's argument come across to you?

One of the arguments used by those who oppose the ordination of women in the Anglican Church is that it is an innovation. They claim that we shouldn't change a tradition which they believe was passed down from the earliest time of the church (though, in fact, the New Testament doesn't talk about ordination in the way we currently understand it.)

- Does this argument have any merit, as far as you are concerned?
- When are we justified in changing a long-standing position in the church? Does the length of time a particular opinion has been held have any bearing on its authority?
- Are there things that you think should never be changed about the church?

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Session 3

Mystery vs. Understanding

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

The picture below, by Derek Lucas, shows Seal Church as we think it looked in the early to mid 19th Century (looking forward from the back of the church).

- How is it different from the building we see today (Below)?
- What might it tell us about the priorities of the people who designed and worshipped in this church interior?



Seal Church in the early 19th Century
Derek Lucas



Medieval Churches were richly decorated, with elaborate rituals, conducted in Latin, a language most people couldn't understand. The Protestant Reformation brought many changes to church buildings and worship, emphasizing preaching the Word of God at a time when there was a growing emphasis in society on rational understanding and education. Statues and stained glass windows were removed, often violently, and painted walls were whitewashed, with boards showing the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer being the only adornment behind the altar.

During the later 19th and 20th Century, many C of E churches reintroduced decoration and ritual.

Churches in other denominations have also argued about these matters – some, like the Baptists, tend to prefer plain churches and an emphasis on the Bible; others, like the Eastern Orthodox churches emphasize the mystery of God in their worship.

These different positions reflect different attitudes to Christian life. Should faith be rational – something we can understand completely – or should it contain elements of mystery?

Read:

Romans 11.33 -36 & 1 Corinthians 14. 13-19

In the Bible we find passages which emphasise the mystery of God. He is unknowable and beyond our understanding. We also find passages which seem to encourage us to try to understand faith, and communicate it in a way which others can understand. Sometimes, as in these passages, one writer (St Paul) seems to be saying both things.

- Do you think worship should be plain, simple and rational or do you like there to be an air of mystery in worship?
- What do we lose if we prioritise one approach to worship over the other?
- Donald Rumsfeld, the US Defence Secretary under George W. Bush famously said: *“as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns - the ones we don't know we don't know.”*
- What are the things you feel you know about your faith? What are the things you know you don't know? Are there some things you feel you'll never know?

There are other areas of life where we often seem desperate to find explanations that will tie everything down. There is usually a popular demand for public inquiries after accidents, for example, and many people expect that scientists will be able to provide explanations for everything.

- Why do you think we want to explain and understand the world?
- Are there dangers in thinking we can do this?

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Session 4

Distinctiveness vs. Inclusivity

Introduction – Who's in?

- If you were having a party, how would you choose who to invite?
- If you could choose who was allowed to live in Seal, how would you choose?
- Who do you think might not feel at home in our church, and why?

Read: Genesis 12.1-3

God promises Abraham that in him “all the families of the earth will be blessed.” He is not just Abraham’s God, but the God of the whole world. Throughout the Old Testament there are references to a universal vision for the whole of humanity being brought back into relationship with God (e.g. Isaiah 2.2). Israel is to live out this vision as a witness to the rest of the world.

However, in tension with this inclusive picture there are also parts of the Bible which seem to limit the blessing of God to certain groups or individuals and require them to live in a certain way in order to be part of the people of God.

Read: Nehemiah chapters 1 & 13

Nehemiah was a Jewish leader who had been an important official to the Persian king Artaxerxes in the period following the exile in Babylon. The exile of the people of Judah in Babylon had now ended, but Nehemiah heard that Jerusalem was still in ruins. He gained permission from the king to go back to rebuild the city. When he got there he discovered that the people had intermarried with other local tribes and that they were not living by the rules of the Jewish faith. He undertook what would now be seen as an aggressive programme of re-education.

The book that bears his name paints him as the hero (it is written in the first person but may not be by him), and singles out others by name as villains. One of these is Tobiah, who is described as an Ammonite, a foreigner, although Tobiah is a Jewish name. Biblical experts now believe that he was of mixed origin, and possibly saw Nehemiah as an interloper into an established community which had found a way for a wide range of people to co-exist. He was married

to a relative of the Jewish high priest, and lived in the temple itself until Nehemiah had him thrown out.

In the New Testament too we find instances of lines being drawn between those who will and will not “inherit the kingdom” – though the lines aren’t always drawn in the same places! (For example see Matthew 25.31-46 & John 3.18).

- Nehemiah stands up for what he believes to be right, purifying the people of Judah from the influence of other faiths and nations. Do you think he was right to do so?
- Some churches set strict criteria for those who want to join them. Others emphasise that they are there for the whole community. What are the pros and cons of each approach?
- The Church of England, as the Established church has the legal duty to marry, baptise and bury anyone who happens to live in their parish if they ask for this. We have, historically, tended to try to serve and be open to the whole community. Some people feel that this weakens the ability of the church to proclaim a distinctive message to the world, as it leads us to try to be all things to all people. What do you think?
- Are there times when we need to stand firm on some issue, even if that means that some people in the community will feel alienated? If so, what issues do you think this might apply to?
- The same tension between inclusivity and distinctiveness can be seen in other areas of life, for example, should immigrants be required to live according to “our” way of life? Who should decide what “our” way of life is?

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