

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 19th May 2019 10am

Rev Peter Cornick

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

Last week, the Methodist Church published its report on marriage and relationships. The press have inevitably, highlighted those themes which are, by way of being a change from the past, controversial. Those themes are:

1. The provision for same sex marriage in church; marriage, is to be described as between two people, 'through it, they may experience, explore and express God's gracious love.'
2. An understanding of couples who co-habit; in such relationships, 'the church recognises that the love of God is present within the love of human beings who are drawn to each other'.
3. The liturgical provision for prayers, when a marriage ends; recognising the need to form good relationships even in parting.

Whether these changes are controversial or long overdue, the headlines miss a significant theme throughout the whole report. How do we relate well to each other? How do we live faithfully to God, and in relationships which in this modern age, are diverse. Relating well to one another applies to us, whatever our sexuality, our gender, and at whatever stage our relationship may be – although particularly when such a relationship is strained or ending. The report sensitively deals with society as it is, rather than pretending there is only one model. It recognises the complexity and pain of relationships and sexuality, rather than pretending neither exist.

Jesus, addresses the disciples. He has shown them how to wash each other's feet. He is aware of the breakdown in the group – betrayal. I accept, Jesus is not talking about marriage, still less is he making a

definitive statement on co-habitation or same sex marriage. What he is about though, is encouraging his disciples – us – to relate well to one another. Love one another – as I have loved you. And how do we discern that Jesus loved? The marriage and relationships report, says this, which might help us to understand Jesus’s mandate to love:

‘All significant relationships should be built on love, commitment, fidelity, loyalty, honesty, mutual respect, equality and the desire for mutual flourishing of the people involved.’– It affirms that there is no room in any kind of relationship for self-interest, or for abuse.

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Whilst focusing on marriage, the report is careful to highlight the needs and lives of those who are single. There is an interesting discussion on the words in the current marriage service of marriage being a gift of God – if a gift, why then might that gift not be given to all. It is an interesting question, left I think un-answered, whilst recognising how many find marriage as being a gift, a helpful concept.

The report illustrates how marriage – its purpose and expectations – has changed over time. One can track these changes through the formal liturgies of the church. There has been a shift, over time, from emphasising marriage as being for procreation, to that of companionship. Marriage has been seen as a way of controlling sexual desire where sex outside of marriage has sometimes been regarded as sinful. Drawing on contemporary understandings might point us to seeing relationships as an expression of sexuality in its broadest sense, which is life affirming in a loving relationship.

It is interesting how the views of younger Methodist people are referenced. The 3Generate gathering has certainly been a forum for influence and change. Young people holding sincere Christian beliefs but who inhabit a wholly different world of relationships from an older generation, have found it hard to comprehend the views of the church on relationships.

Of course, not everyone agrees or welcomes the proposed changes. There is disagreement about scriptural references involving relationships which you can read in the report. 'Sometimes,' the report says 'we find it hard to understand why others do not see things as we do and hurt has been caused to many people along the way. Yet as the Methodist people, we have chosen to journey together and find ways of living with contradictory convictions.' Again, how do we relate well to those with whom we disagree. This applies not just to differing biblical interpretations on sexual relationships, but to how we speak to each other in Church Council or on-line as Methodists. We do not always relate well to each other. **I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.** The proposed changes to the position on marriage and relationships will be prayerfully debated at the Methodist Conference this year. We as a church will have a chance to reflect on the outcomes of that debate before decisions are made in 2020.

Personally, I welcome the recognition by the church of diverse relationships, and greater inclusion, reflecting the church and Christian life today. The proposals speak to me, as the report states, about a God of 'radical love' who, in Trinity, is 'modelling for us the nature and importance of relationships.' In fact, reading the report has helped me to reflect on relating well within my own marriage – if it achieves that with others too, it will be a report worth writing. If these proposals are accepted, will be delighted to conduct marriages of couples, who 'through [marriage], ... may experience, explore and express God's gracious love.'