

Address by Howard Friend for 14th August 2022 at St David's Church

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – Amen.

Howard – I want you to go and do a Mother and Baby check out at Newbarn Farm. Midwife says it was a bit of a struggle last night. So were my instructions from the Senior Partner in the GP practice in Barnstaple where I trained. But - he continued – keep your head down as you drive up the lane. Father in law's fallen out with them - he took a pot shot at me last week when I was up there!

True story – and yes the mother and baby were fine. And no – no lead pellet damage to my car. Such were the realities of farming family feuds in medical practice in the 80s in rural North Devon.

Family dysfunction / arguments and fallings out – of course they're very rare these days. I'm sure none of us is aware of any problem in our families - or Church Families - and as for our Worldwide Anglican family – well everything's just hunky-dory - or not.

Come on then - you say - what exactly is this Gospel reading all about?:- surely not an endorsement for family war - Jesus said it - War not Peace – so I AM justified in hating my brother.

No – as with any difficult piece of scripture – and this one's a 7 or 8 on a scale of 10 - we must try and understand the context – and – place it in a wider understanding of the whole of scripture. So what's the context:-

Well - Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem – to what he knew was in store for him there -- and he was frustrated with his disciples for not getting the message about what he as Messiah would actually do and in particular the sort of Kingdom he was introducing.

And he says – you lot know how to predict the weather but you can't see what's in front of your very eyes, when it comes to interpreting the present situation. I'm not here to overthrow the Roman occupation and establish a militaristic Jewish state.

No – my Kingdom is not of this world – it's much bigger - and if you chose to be part of that Kingdom you will face opposition – not everyone's going to agree with you - and even in your own families there will be divisions.

The different writers and bible commentaries I've studied all suggest that's the way to understand this exceptional passage – because as we're all aware - the rest of scripture emphasises the Peace that Christ brings to the human

heart and to communities. The Kingdom Jesus introduced is all about living in the light of the love of God.

So why is it our church families are sometimes so dysfunctional? Why do we take pot shots at each other like that warring farming family I mentioned earlier - and what can we do to heal such wounds? That's what I want to concentrate on for a while now, partly because of the problems aired at the Lambeth Conference but also because of our own parish dysfunction.

Gay marriage and women's priestly ministry are focus points for division and it saddens me - as I'm sure it does you - that this should be so.

Now look - I don't have a magic solution to either of these problems but here are my thoughts on Church family dysfunction - based on two statues here in Exeter.

Yes - you did hear correctly: two statues - well more accurately - one statue and one monument. There's a newfound enthusiasm for toppling statues, rewriting wrongs - or history - depending on your point of view. Let's see if you're in the toppling mood with either of these: (And be patient you'll soon get my point)

First: the monument just outside the Maynard School - between it and the St Leonard's Medical Practice. Does anyone know the one I mean? Have you ever read the inscription? It commemorates two Protestants, one man, one woman who - in 1557 - were disemboweled or burnt at the stake (I can't remember which was which now) - one for denying the Supremacy of the Pope and the other for not accepting the doctrine of Transubstantiation.

Now we all know that Mary did such things to the Protestants - but we also know that when her half-sister Elizabeth came to the throne the Catholics suffered just as horribly. What most intrigued me about this monument was that it was erected in 1909 (by public subscription so it says). What does that say to us? Well - I'll tell you what it says to me. It's a very partisan and inflammatory statement:

'Look what those Catholics did to our Protestant forebears'.

There's no attempt to see things from the other side. Maybe there weren't any Catholic martyrs in Elizabeth's reign here in Exeter. But it's at best only one side of the story.

To me it exemplifies how not to do this Christian thing. Loving our neighbour as ourself - remember that one?

Personally I'd be in favour of toppling it - or at the very least mentioning Catholic martyrs too. But – do not despair Exonians! – because we do have a statue commemorating another 16th Century person who provides a way out of this partisan Christian family war.

He was a Priest and Theologian. Born in Heavitree in 1554 - so a mere 3 years old when that other atrocity was going on. Anybody know who I'm talking about and where his statue is?

Richard Hooker. Cathedral Green.

Now he was important in his day for propounding a middle way between Puritan and Catholic extremists:

Catholics argued any case of doctrine or practice through the Prisms of Scripture and Tradition (Church Tradition that is). Puritans took Holy Scripture alone as their guide. And they argued to the death.

Unfortunately - not a lot has changed over 400 years - has it?

But Hooker in his 'Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity' – that is Church Governance - introduced a third element - Reason, which he argued was God-given and should be exercised alongside Scripture and Church Tradition when sorting out those knotty problems all Church communities face from time to time.

Scripture, Tradition, Reason

Plus, that very necessary ingredient – humility. (After all it's not My Kingdom come – my will be done – that we pray is it?) We are all God's children and we need to recognise that in each other. We don't ourselves have all the answers.

The Bishops of Nigeria and Southern Sudan are my brothers in Christ - St Michael's are my brothers and sisters in Christ.

Back to Richard Hooker's statue on Cathedral Green to illustrate my point about the settling of Intra-Anglican Family Warfare – which is my main concern in this sermon.

Those of you who know this statue: – which way does he point - that is to say which way does he face? Away – from the Cathedral – and towards the City That position was presumably chosen, on purpose, by whoever erected it – and for me it's important. I like the way this famous Exeter-born Churchman, whose wisdom informs Anglicanism, looks out from the church and not back to it.

Is it stretching a point to say Hooker's statue faces out not only to the world but also to the future? Well, I don't think so - his third way of reason and implied compromise and reconciliation was very forward looking. We certainly need to be reasonable and forward looking today if we want our faith to be understandable to a younger generation. We otherwise face irrelevance and a slow death.

Scripture, Tradition, Reason.

I suggest we follow Richard Hooker's gaze – from tradition and based on comprehensive view of the love of God in Holy Scripture - in favour of Women priests and Gay marriage. Reason – looking out from the Church - demands it.

So then – go and have a look at these statues and then decide - which one, which line, you will chose:-

The one perpetuating the partisan view - determined to exacerbate difference? Or the one trying to find compromise and harmony - with God's precious gift of Reason - not forgetting the absolutely essential ingredient of humility.