Today we’re going to think about the elephant in the room. It would be much easier not to, of course. It would be much more straightforward to try and pretend that cathedrals are elephant-free zones. But, surely, one of the advantages of being a cathedral, and of being Coventry Cathedral in particular, is the freedom and the responsibility we have to acknowledge the presence, not just of the occasional elephant in the room, but a whole herd of them!

As a result of what happened on and after November 14th 1940, history has gifted us with a particular calling to be a centre for peace and reconciliation, something for which we are known all over the world. But for that to mean anything today we can’t afford simply to sit on the undoubted laurels from the past. If we’re to be true to our vocation, a passion for peace and reconciliation has to be the major strand in our present life as well. We’ve been a safe place for the healing of the wounds of history in the past, yes – but we need also to be a safe space for the healing of today’s difficult and painful issues, a place where people from all over the world can learn to live with difference and celebrate diversity. We’re not to hide from the elephants in the room but actively to embrace them!

But embracing an elephant is a challenging business, isn’t it? Rather more straightforward to imagine than actually to do. How much easier it is not to pay them all that much attention. But that doesn’t mean that they just go away. Far from it. In fact, during this past week we heard one of the largest of them trumpet rather loudly. You probably heard it. It was just after midnight two nights ago...

In Westminster the spotlight was on John Coffey and Bernardo Marti. At the front of the queue in Brighton were Andrew Wale and Neil Allard. The first in Islington were Peter McGraith and David Cabreza. I’m talking, of course, about the first same-sex couples to get married in the early hours of Saturday morning. How are we to respond to this seismic shift in the way our culture treats the sacred institution of marriage?

For many people within the church, the reaction has been ‘...and about time too!’ For them, the ending of discrimination against homosexual people who wish to get married represents the putting right of a major injustice. The pictures of undiluted happiness in yesterday’s papers say all that needs to be said – and the sooner the church sorts itself out and catches up the better. This is what living in the light looks like.

Michael Sadgrove, one of my predecessors as Precentor here and now Dean of Durham, put it like this in his blog yesterday: “...we shouldn’t be afraid of how this development enlarges our understanding of marriage. Some say that equal marriage is an invalid distortion of marriage as traditionally understood. But if it is, so was the 19th century change in marriage law to allow men to marry their deceased wife’s sister (once forbidden as incestuous in the table of kindred and affinity). More recently, remarriage after divorce and the church’s provision of services of blessing were equally contentious at the time.

“My point,” writes Michael, “is that neither of these changed the nature of marriage: they simply enlarged its scope by admitting to it people who were once excluded. Equal marriage is another stage in the long evolution of an institution that has been reshaped at different times down the centuries. But its essence is what it always was: the covenanted union of two people for life. That has not changed.”

But, as we know, others are deeply troubled. For them, living in the light looks very different. The fact that two people love each other is not enough. For them, contrary to Michael Sadgrove’s claim, there is significantly more to the essence of marriage than the covenanted union of two people for life. Something of fundamental importance is lost if those getting married belong to the same sex. For those who think along these lines, same-sex marriage denies the self-evident biological, physiological, and psychological differences between men and women which find their complementarity in marriage. It also sets to one side the needs of children who flourish best when raised under
the influence of their natural father and mother. As one commentator put it, “It rubs against the grain of the universe, and when you rub against the grain of divine design you’re bound to get splinters. Or worse.”

Actually, some of the opposition to same-sex marriage comes from rather unexpected sources. Here, for example, is how the actor Rupert Everett expressed himself rather forcefully on the subject a couple of years ago. “I loathe heterosexual weddings. The wedding cake, the party, the champagne, the inevitable divorce two years later. It’s just a waste of time in the heterosexual world, and in the homosexual world I find it personally beyond tragic that we want to ape this institution that is so clearly a disaster.”

Well, disastrous or not, our society’s leaders have made their choice and their decision is now reflected in what is actually happening. Same-sex marriage is legal. As well as ‘husband and wife’ we now have ‘husband and husband’ and ‘wife and wife’.

So, what are we to do? How are we to resolve the impasse between those for whom same-sex marriage is to be celebrated and those for whom it is to be deplored?

First, we need to deal with real people rather than with caricatures. This is the sort of issue where people tend to remain in enclaves, separate groups of people who think like they do. But we can’t learn to live with difference unless we experience the difference first hand. A group of like-minded people cannot possibly celebrate diversity all by themselves! We need to find ways of engaging with those who come to different conclusions about this issue. We need to create space for interaction and dialogue. And while we talk together, we need to err on the side of welcome, hospitality and generosity.

Secondly, we need to resist the temptation to view those with whom we disagree as beyond the pale and so, in effect, excommunicate them. When faced with someone within the Christian community with whom I disagree – or think I’m going to disagree – I’ve found it helpful to ask the question, ‘Can I say for sure that this person is not my brother or sister in Christ?’ The answer, of course, is ‘no’. I may have my concerns; there may be important boxes they don’t tick – but I can’t say for sure. In which case, I need to give them the benefit of the doubt and treat them as my brother or sister. I need to take them seriously. I need to see them as those through whom God may have something to say to me. I need to bear in mind the possibility that they might be right.

Which brings me, thirdly, to some often-quoted words of Oliver Cromwell. In 1650, writing to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland about their support for the king, he implored his readers, ‘I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken.’ This is especially for those of us who have already made up our minds: think it possible that you may be mistaken.

I’ve found it helpful – not conclusive but helpful! – to reflect on the experience of the apostle Peter in Acts chapter 11. Do you remember the story? He’s goes up onto the roof to pray, becomes hungry and wants something to eat. While it’s being prepared he falls into a trance. He sees heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it are all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he hears a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ To which his response, guided by his understanding of God’s law and honed by centuries of tradition, is ‘By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.’ The story continues: ‘The voice said to him again, a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.’

Whether or not same-sex marriage is a parallel issue is, of course, a moot point. But the thing is this: the fact that a new way of approaching an issue overturns centuries of tradition is neither here nor there – we’ve been here before! We’ve been wrong about other things for centuries – perhaps the same is true when it comes our thinking about marriage.

Or perhaps not. If you were hoping a for a clear steer one way or the other, you’re not going to get it from me this morning! I want simply to ask us as a Cathedral community to do what it says on our tin – get stuck in and help this particular elephant to emerge from the shadows and find peace. Let us do all we can to ‘live as children of light’ as we ‘try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord’. Amen.

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