

Last Sunday, Geoff distributed a summary of a proposal which will be put to the next National Assembly of the Uniting Church to be held in July. The proposal addresses the question of how the Uniting Church will respond to the changes in the Marriage Act, allowing persons of the same gender to marry. Undoubtedly, there will be some strongly held views among church members and within our congregation. Accepting that the Spirit of God, as promised in both our readings today, is within us and among us, how are we to live together when we disagree on matters that might touch strong emotions, or challenge long held beliefs?

For almost quarter of a century, our Uniting Church has courageously listened to the voices of the marginalized people in the LGBTQTI community within and beyond our congregations. Our leaders have invited and encouraged us to address questions of sexuality and ministry. The resulting discussions in many cases caused anger and division.

My first placement as an ordained Minister in the Uniting Church was to the congregation of Young. About 18 months earlier, the then Minister resigned because of the ongoing discussions within the wider Uniting Church on these matters. Financed by some wealthy members of the congregation, he set up an independent church in the same town. All the young families went with him. The congregation was reduced from over 100 with a good spread of ages, to a congregation of 40 mainly older folk. Families who had worshiped together, were split, some going to other congregations and others leaving church altogether.

When I arrived the congregation, of mainly older folk, were still grieving their loss and angry with the former minister.

This was replicated in more than a few congregations around the nation.

As bad as that may seem, it is as nothing compared to how the church dealt with differences over doctrine in past centuries. A search on

Wikipedia revealed the names of those executed for holding views that disagreed with official church doctrine:

360 Catholic martyrs of the English Reformation  
35 burnt at the stake in pre-reformation Europe  
290 burnt at the stake in RC countries during the reformation period  
19 burnt at the stake in Protestant countries  
4 burnt at the stake in Eastern orthodox countries

This doesn't include even more whose names have been lost or were never recorded.

With that in mind, let us now turn to the Gospel reading for today. John has written this passage as if the persecuted church, on trial for heresy, is defended by the Holy Spirit, who puts the world on trial. The clues to this interpretation, I find in the line "they will put you out of the synagogue, and the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God". The idea of a trial is further strengthened by John using the term Paraclete for the Spirit of Truth. Paraclete is a Greek word whose primary meaning is that of a legal advocate as in a court of law.

By the time that John wrote his gospel, late in the first century, conflict within synagogues between followers of Jesus and the Pharisees were resulting in the expulsion of the Christians from the synagogue, which meant exclusion from all aspects of Jewish society. It would not be long before they were to suffer official sanctions under the Roman authorities. The early church for whom John writes is suffering injustice. Not surprising, after what the religious and Roman authorities did to Christ.

In this imagined trial, the church's advocate (the Spirit of Truth) presents the evidence: sin, righteousness and judgement.

In John's gospel, Jesus gives his followers only one commandment: "love one another as I have loved you". Sin, then, is the opposite of love.

Sin is rejecting the way of love personified in Jesus. His way of love cut across matters of religious dogma and doctrine and instead emphasized right relationship with God, the Father, and caring compassionate relationships with others. When non-Jews, people from another faith, showed interest in his teaching, he knew his work was nearly completed.

The evidence for righteousness lies in the resurrection, seen as God's vindication of everything that Jesus taught, the way he lived and that he was truly the Son of God, as opposed to Caesar Augustus who was also declared to be a son of god, according to Roman propaganda. Judgement is against the world, that is the rulers who use violence to dominate and exploit. Those who put Jesus to death are found guilty for trying to kill the love that flows from God.

For John's community facing exclusion from the synagogue, and hence from all aspects of their culture, I think they would be encouraged by John's words to love one another as Jesus loved. The Spirit of Truth affirms the way of Jesus. That Spirit is within each person, I believe present in every person, encouraging persistence in resisting evil, enabling open minds in the face of changing understandings of the world, and giving hope during times of trouble.

How then do we engage in discussions on controversial topics that effect the life of the church? Is our primary aim to prove that we are right? And by implication, someone else is wrong? What will hold the church together as we negotiate change in circumstances, change in regulations, change that might touch deep emotions?

On this day of Pentecost, we are reminded that we are not abandoned by God, whose Spirit is within and among us. John's gospel emphasizes the importance of relationships: with God and with one another. Luke, in the book of Acts, emphasizes the cross-cultural nature of our faith. I like to think that, with the Spirit of God guiding us, we can

maintain a loving unity even with a divergence of opinions on matters of doctrine, and a divergence of cultural practices and language.