

21st January 2023, Epiphany 3, Matins
Jeremiah 3: 21-4:2 and Titus 2: 1-8, 11-14
Mother Emma

Something I have noticed over the past few years has been the introduction of “trigger warnings” at the start of films and television programmes. Sometimes these helpfully alert the reader to violent or traumatic storylines which may trigger personal memories causing great distress; at other times they offer a reminder that the performance may date from a different social era or context, with accepted views we might now see as both inappropriate and hurtful. For example, sitcoms from the time when I was a teenager, are now preceded by the warning, “This show was made in 1980 and reflects the broadcast standards, language and attitudes of its time”.

At Evening Prayer in recent weeks, we have been reading from various Epistles and some of the views expressed around women, slaves, children, marriage and divorce have prompted both discomfort and discussion. As I struggled with today’s reading from the Pastoral Epistle to Titus, I began to wonder how people would react if they were routinely warned from the lectern before the reading, that what the congregation is about to hear may reflect (for example) the language and social attitudes of the Eastern Mediterranean during the first century. There might be an element of shock at applying such secular sensitivities to Holy Writ, or of irritation at modern ways, or a sense that the reader was just stating the patently obvious, though there might also be some relief at recognizing the effect that understanding context can have.

For centuries, theologians and ordinary Christians have wrestled with precisely these issues – to what extent are the views we find recorded in the Scriptures, and perhaps especially in the Epistles, the result of church leaders seeking to clarify and mould their understanding of God’s will and Christ’s story against a particular social and historical backdrop? The Letters known as the Pastoral Epistles, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, have also long been the subject of another controversy.

Since the early 19th century, theologians have cast doubt on whether these were actually written by St Paul, as stated in the opening greeting, or whether the grammar, historical context and religious expectations appear sufficiently different to suggest they were in fact written by someone else, seeking to interpret Paul’s true meaning for a new generation. Certainly, their subject-matter is somewhat different from Paul’s earlier Epistles, as one person has expressed it, more “moralistic than prophetic”. It also seems that, whereas Paul expected the Second Coming at any moment, and urged his congregations to keep themselves pure and focused on the imminent Day of the Lord, the Cretan congregation addressed in the letter to Titus seem to be reflecting on how to live as Christians within their earthly society longer term.

Our passage from the letter to Titus today deals with the way in which certain social groups of Christians might be expected to act. The style is based upon the so-called “domestic codes” drawn up by Greeks, Romans and other pagan societies at that time to maintain the order and fabric of society, although the author of the Letter to Titus emphasizes that these codes should be followed in order “*that the Word of God be not blasphemed.*” This might imply that the outside “pagan” world might blame the Christian Gospel for any behaviour on the part of its adherents which shocked their contemporary cultural sensitivities. Instructions that all parts of society should embrace

sobriety and gravity, much followed by the Puritans and other conservative Protestants, do not really form a central part of Jesus' teaching.

The "family values" which strongly echo Greek and Roman views that the glory of womanhood was to be a loving wife, mother and housekeeper might encourage us to question Paul's approval of Lydia, a successful businesswoman dealing in purple cloth, who set up her own house church in her home. Jesus himself appears to commend Mary, who hung on his every word, over Martha, who made supper for his disciples, and to be on good, not disapproving terms with the women who followed him, suggesting that the writer to Titus is heavily influenced by the pagan societies around him.

So to what extent, people have asked, are these Pastoral Epistles rooted in a particular time and place, with its own concerns and outside influences, and to what extent are we? Throughout Christian history, the degree of engagement between church and secular culture has been vigorously debated, from the writings of St Augustine onwards. Puritans rebelled against contemporary debauchery and excess, creating their own society of sobriety, seriousness and Biblical study; the Quakers, horrified by the violence of the sectarian Civil War, built their own denomination embracing pacificism, honesty, silent non-dogmatic worship and the equality of all before God. The Church of England has long been accused of being too closely tied to the political and social establishment, and some of the non-Conformist or charismatic – and even High Church – movements initially sought to step away from this perceived error.

Today, we see similar deeply emotive debates, this time within the Anglican Church itself, over the boundaries between what are claimed to be "secular" and "Biblical" views on, for example, questions of sexuality, with liberal churches wishing to emphasize the social context of Biblical writing, and, in their own way, to stop the church seeming entirely out of step with society, while others prefer to observe the first-century codes enshrined in the Scriptures. And so – and this may seem a provocative note on which to end, but bearing in mind that Jesus encouraged his followers to seek out their own answers to questions about the kingdom of God – how should we, in today's world, be living out the Christian Gospel?

Are we here to uphold without question the behaviour codes which Christians, living in very different societies, have embraced over the centuries? To what extent should we seek to align ourselves with social norms in our own society, so as not to render the Church irrelevant? How do we live lives of sincerity, faith, hope and love which follow most closely the teachings of Christ as they have come down to us? These are questions on which we, as an established Church, as separate churches, as families and as individuals, are called to reflect upon constantly, prayerfully and openly, as we seek what it is that God is asking of us.

Amen