

It's the last Sunday of Pride month and, as my sermon for this morning was (unusually for me) thoroughly wedded to the Bible reading, I thought I would revisit the sermon that follows. Wearily, the homophobic outrage that spurred it a few years ago is easily replaced by a current one- indeed I can replace the one from a few weeks ago, and a few weeks before that and so on...

It might seem, at first glance, just a little odd that one of the best loved of Sunday school tales is one of persecution and grisly murder. First glance. After a slightly extended reflection on the *Lord of the Flies* horrors of a typical playground, one may be led to conclude that perhaps it isn't that surprising at all. I suspect, however, that Daniel in the Lion's Den (original or *Bel & the Dragon* remake) is wildly popular among the younger Christian not because it is a heroic tale of faith in the face of horrific persecution, but because it features lions. It's such a good tale apparently, that tis is the second time we've had it at evensong this year. Aw. Cute kitties. Look! There's Simba eating your sister. Lions! This feline focus is a shame, because although lions have pretty much no role to play in the theology of our faith, persecution certainly does.

If the disciples are the building blocks with which Christ built his church, then it is persecution that has crimson-coloured those bricks blood red. The Christian calendar bristles with faithful forbears dispatched for their faith in a variety of unpleasant, sticky, and overheated ways- generally experiencing ends so horrible that beheading is the light option. But it's not just the hagiographies: huge chunks of our sacred scriptures deal head on with what it signifies when other people think your faith is so repulsively offensive that we would all be better off if you were chopped into little pieces and relocated into the belly of a big cat rather than be allowed to carry on spouting that nonsense.

So the books of Daniel, Esther, Judith and many of the other later OT scriptures can be boiled down to the need to keep the faith in the face of such hatred. Before Jesus is executed in one of the most agonising ways humanity has ever conceived, he insists his disciples must pick up their crosses and follow him: he blesses in advance those who will be reviled and persecuted on his account. And when the days are drawing in and time is drawing to its close, the lions are hungrier, their keepers ever more desperate, along comes the book of the film of the end- Revelation- and it's a persecutory nightmare, dripping damp with the blood of the martyrs, a veritable passive-aggressive bloodbath with you as first victim. Open the Bible and persecution is rarely more than a paragraph away.

Well that was then and this is now, but that past still matters, because Christianity is a historical faith. It claims to be based on historical events and its present is formed by its past, including those wearying and heroic chains of persecution. But Christianity is also *informed* by its past: our creed claims unchanging truths and so, inevitably we respond to new challenges by looking backwards. There are all sorts of intellectual, theological and ethical outcomes of this holy hindsight but the one you are most likely to have met is a small bracelet bearing the legend: What would Jesus do?

Bottom line, although some of its manifestations have been excruciatingly cringemaking, WWJD is a pretty sound rule of thumb for anyone trying to follow the Christian life. After all, we are followers of Jesus, which means monkey see, monkey do, following the leader as closely as we can: in more exalted language, we are being formed into Christ, which means ultimately, doing what Jesus would do.

So. What would Jesus do? This nearly always mean guessing or using our imagination because most of what Jesus might do or not do, we don't know. Even worse, we don't know what Jesus *did* do, for most of what he did. We weren't there, and nobody who was there thought to write it all down- they only wrote down a tiny fraction of it. Yes, we can be certain that Jesus was never tempted to troll someone on the internet or avoid paying his bus fare or watch dodgy tractor videos on YouTube: not because of the kind of good guy he unequivocally was, but because such temptations were, in 1st century Judea, not available to him.

And this is where what seems such a simple instruction 'what would Jesus do? you do the same' becomes a lot more complicated, because what we do know of what Jesus did was what he did in the 1st Century Palestine and *that* does not *necessarily* help us to answer the question , 'what would Jesus do- in the 21st Century'. If that isn't quite clicking, let me challenge you to think how you would answer the question 'what do you think you would do' when you were five or fifteen or fifty. There it is, you see, implicit in the question 'what *would* Jesus do': the question admits it: we're making a guess.

So here's a WWJD question for the today: would Jesus fly the Pride flag in his church? Currently a private member's motion trying to ban churchs from doing this is being considered in General Synod. It seems unlikely to succeed, but someone

claiming to be a Christian is trying to make it a reality, which means we need to ask, what would Jesus do?

I think we want to know about Jesus's take on that practice because that motion is the argument which alas several of my colleagues are unashamed to make: 'we're Christians, of course we're not going to fly the pride flag'. That argument is not really true, for the very simple reason that many, many Christians, a majority in fact, certainly Anglicans, are quite happy for LGBT people not to live lives of shame—which is what Pride in this instance (as opposed to the seven deadly sins instance) is about—and are quite happy to see a rainbow+ flag flying from the steeple. Whereas it might be true to say 'I'm a conservative evangelical Christian: this is part of my beliefs' it's not the same thing at all as saying 'I'm a Christian, it's part of my beliefs'.

I know for most of you this isn't a particularly burning issue: but please listen on because there are wider implications in this niche argument, which very much apply to what matters more to you. All sorts of things tend to be connected, as the women of the USA have found out this week.

So if those who claim to be his followers cannot agree, WWJD? Anything we do say in this instance is a guess, and as you probably know, no guess is truly random: our hopes, cultures, backgrounds, experiences and prejudices sneak in. I think there's a pretty good chance that the 21st century Jesus *would* be running the progress pride pennant up his church's flagpole; he'd be there with his whip of cords driving the 'conversion therapists' from the Temple: if I didn't I wouldn't be stood where I am right now. And here's why.

There are a handful of verses in the Bible— you could count them on one hand with a finger or two missing— which some people interpret as meaning that the only possible intimate relationship for humans is one man and one woman for life. That's the positive slant on it. The less positive slant has it that God mandates all sorts of unpleasant things like discrimination, harassment, imprisonment, executions and so forth for people who don't fit. Now of course the interpretation of those parts of scriptures is fiercely disputed: sometimes they're clear as mud, and in one place modern readers basically invent the meaning of a particular Greek word, because St Paul seems to have invented it himself— without defining it for future generations. Nobody knows what it means, so it means what you want.

But, let's imagine that just for the sake of argument we *can* say that the writers of the scriptures meant what the most conservative Christians think they meant. Surely *that* must mean no pride flags or gay cakes and lots and lots of conversion torture? Well, only if you think nothing changes.

As Christians, we are people whose faith looks back. But what we see when we look back is constant change. The Scriptures are central to what we believe, but God's revelation is not frozen in time. Patently it isn't. Even in the bit of the history of God's relationship with his pilgrim people that we have trapped in print— the Bible—, we see not the icy stasis of the glacier but a swollen river in full flood: where we are at the beginning is a long way from where we are at the end. We start killing our brother; then we must love our neighbour; and then we must love our enemy too. At the start of the tale, who would die for their faith? In the middle, Daniel would: by the end God incarnate does. God's revelation is progressive, and our comprehension of it moves and improves. It is an absolute absurdity to pick on a certain point in the journey of progressive revelation— the point when the Bible had been written, say— and proclaim, that's it, complete, finished. God can say nothing more to us, and we now understand it all, fully. That can only be true if that is the point when time stops. It wasn't.

Jesus is the full and complete revelation of God: and Jesus is not the Bible.

Which brings us back again to that question: what would Jesus do? WWJD? How do we decide? We look at the Scriptures, absolutely. There we see, at each stage, a faith changing, progressing, moving forward and moving on.

So putting down our Bible, we have to say, what would Jesus do *now*. What would the God-man who preached a love so wide it included the outcast, the ostracised, the marginalised and the despised do? What would the God-man who preached that the sabbath was made for man not man for the sabbath, persecuted by the religious conservatives of his age, what would he do? What would the God-man who went to the cross for all his brothers and sisters, without qualification and without condition do? What would Jesus do?

He'd fly that flag.