

Views from the Pews - Debate in Church

'He has uttered blasphemy' cried the High Priest.

'He has uttered blasphemy' muttered Salman Rushdie's assailant.

And in our own country there's continuing controversy over Gloriavale's attempts to suppress dissent. Down the ages, religious institutions seem to struggle with dissent. This is particularly true of top-down organisations, which require high levels of compliance. Luther's travails are but one example. On the other hand, anarchy will not do either – faith (however personal) is not a matter of cherry-picking the bits that suit us.

So, how – in a world which seems to favour personal choice - do we strike a balance between control imposed from the top on the one hand, and freedom of thought on the other? What approach should Anglicans adopt when modern Christianity has a reputation for 'take it or leave it' – comply or go? Once again, the Gospels provide the answer for today's church. Jesus was always holding tutorials and seminars, sitting down with the people and trying to answer their awkward questions. Questioning and doubt were never treated as a threat – instead Jesus saw every question as an opportunity. And if he was not speaking to the grass roots, he was debating with the hierarchy, pointing out their errors. In doing that, he became a threat. He was branded a blasphemer – a label that enabled the High Priest's connivance with the Romans.

So is debate a key component of church life?

As part of our post-pandemic recovery, with a new Dean and a clergy team who are well-equipped to answer questions without feeling threatened, we could progress quickly to a culture of debate. This places an obligation on the congregation because our Anglican tradition has been to listen politely to the sermon, smile and nod occasionally, and then to mutter a few words to the preacher as we leave church. Is there a time and place now for the laity to test their own understanding by exposing themselves to a bit of theological debate? We have a wonderful public space in the Cathedral Centre; why not use it for a relaxed dinner followed by a

debate? After all, parliamentary democracies rely on debate to refine policy and to chart a course to the future. We are a richly diverse and experienced congregation. We are a resource that God is surely ready to employ in the better understanding of His kingdom.

Even a bit of blasphemy may be allowed from time to time.

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