I begin with something on which all will have some opinion: food. Specifically, its capacity to unite and divide us. “Is there not one bread, and one body?”, asks Paul in I Corinthians 10. Yet in I Corinthians 8, Paul argues, tortuously, about the status of meat offered to idols. Does it matter that the food we just ate might have been blessed in a temple dedicated to a minor deity?

Paul’s answer is ambivalent. Yes, this could be taint-by-association. But on the other hand, no, because God is God, and idols are nothing; so the fact that your ‘Spag-bol’ was elevated before the shrine of Aphrodite is neither here or there: eat up! But think about those with weaker faith who will struggle with you tucking in. But try not to let this spoil your appetite.

So let me play with food and church for a moment, and offer an analogy. We can agree that it would be reasonable to go to a family restaurant and only order and eat vegetarian food. We can also agree it would be unreasonable to complain about other diners eating meat or fish. That’s their business, surely?

It is reasonable to request a vegetarian option at a steakhouse; and no good steakhouse would be without such choices on the menu. Yet it would be unreasonable at a vegetarian restaurant to request a rare-cooked steak.

There are issues of permissiveness and liberty of conscience in any society. No-one seriously orders a steak in a vegetarian restaurant in the same way that few will ask ‘where is the female celebrant?’ at a church that customarily refuses the ministry of women priests (tempting though this is).
It is not hard to imagine how testing and treacherous keeping the pastoral peace in congregations and denominations can actually be. As one educationalist cautions (Grierson, 1985: 18):

…what appears to be the case upon the surface is not necessarily the case. In one [church] a prolonged conflict occurred over the practice of the ladies’ guild of placing a vase of flowers on the communion table. The new minister on the basis of sound theological principles and an impeccable liturgical viewpoint well supported in theological college, made strenuous efforts to remove them.

The conflict proved to be two world views passing each other. The practice had arisen in the particular congregation, positively, as a confession of God’s grace in renewing the world daily; and negatively because of the attempt of a former minister to close down the women’s group. A vase of flowers was to the women’s group, symbol both of their identity as a group and a confession of their faith as Christians. The new minister saw only a custom he could not affirm with integrity. (Jesus did not, after all, so far as we know at the Last Supper, say “he took flowers, and arranged them…tastefully; but nor did Jesus say “light the candles, Thomas…and don’t forget to bow…”).

That was all [the minister] saw, and before his outlook had become informed much damage had been done. Similar stories can be told about attempts to remove national flags from churches…change the arrangement of church furniture bearing brass plates in honour of deceased parents and grandparents …

Closer to home, I recall a process – decades ago – where a Cathedral Chapter were at loggerheads. It was not about doctrine or anything especially important, but rather on issues that to the outside world, seemed utterly trivial. Moreover, as the Chapter were supposed to – at least in theory – profess one faith and one Lord, and be part of one church – no-one could understand why the bitter, rancorous division continued.

Mediators and consultants were called in. A process of truth and reconciliation was begun. And it worked. Eventually. No-one left, and the situation cooled and gradually returned to normal. The consultants, in their final report, stated that they were not sure they could ever achieve unity, but they were glad they had helped the Cathedral get back to a point of reasonable concord. Though their conclusion noted ruefully that the consultants were glad, neither side had possessed the nuclear deterrent – as they were sure it might have been used, and the button pressed, had they not intervened.
What is common and can be shared, but equally probably never owned or monopolised, is what drives many ecclesiastical disputes. Meanings and interpretations of scripture are an obvious example. Customs, artefacts and habits, likewise.

Thus, we often find words like “traditional” being used, and perhaps weaponized. How many times do we hear something like this? “We do it like this because this is how God told us it should be”.

It is hard to argue with the sentence, because the speakers have conflated their practice or belief with God’s opinion. Few will have the hubris or courage to argue with God. Frequently, faiths ‘fudge’ what they ascribe to God, and what may describe God; their comprehension and apprehension of divine action and purpose suffers from confusion. So when I say “you have sinned against God”, what I can often mean by this is that “you have offended me” – and that can be quite different.

So, can there be peace at the end of all this? I think it depends on what you mean by ‘peace’. In any congregation, or denomination, this can mean living with tensions and disagreements. The key question is: can we listen to one another attentively and patiently, change and grow? I strongly suspect that churches can, through patience, forbearance, courage and humility, find their deeper bonds and unity amidst their differences.

Too often, we assume that conflict is a sign of weakness; that difficult arguments point to eventual fragmentation. Yet the history of the Christian church rests in believers contending for creeds, articles of faith, the canon of scripture and actual doctrines that began their life in some incredibly acrimonious debates.

We need to remember that the Spirit is present in the conflict; it is part of the gestation of the church. Our readings remind us of this today. Treat the people you disagree with like a Gentile, Tax-Collector or Neighbour. I need not remind you of how Jesus treated such people and spoke of them: with love, kindness, patience and inclusion; and as people of value and worthy of respect, who could teach a few good home truths about God, faith and love to the very people who despised them. Gentiles, Tax-Collectors and Samaritan neighbours get good write-ups. So, be humble. It’s only when you realise that God still loves everybody, including the people who have continually offended you, that you can gain a smidgen of “the peace that passeth all understanding”.

3