

Almighty and everlasting God,
who stooped to raise fallen humanity
through the child-bearing of blessed Mary;
grant that we, who have seen your glory
revealed in our human nature
and your love made perfect in our weakness,
may daily be renewed in your image
and conformed to the pattern of your Son
Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Common Worship:
Collect of the Blessed Virgin Mary





PART THREE

Making
connections:
where are we
in God's story?

The purpose of Part Three is to explore current Christian thinking and discussions about human identity, sexuality, and marriage. In the light of the good news of Jesus Christ, how do Christians understand and respond to the trends we observed in Part Two?

Chapter 8 outlines the story of salvation – the story of God’s engagement with the world as its creator, its judge and its redeemer.

Chapter 9 notes that, as the Bible tells us this story, it shows us God engaging with human beings in all the reality and complexity of their lives and their relationships. The story of salvation has always been, in part, a story about human identity, sexuality and marriage.

Chapter 10 looks more closely at what this story has to say about human dignity, diversity and identity. It shows that the way we relate these to our deepest identity – in Christ – gives rise to different understandings about the nature of sin and God’s transforming grace.

Chapter 11 turns to the church, a community called to live and proclaim this story of salvation. We look at what the story says about the church’s distinctiveness, and about what belongs and what does not belong in its life together. We also ask what it means when disagreements about these matters arise.

Chapter 12 looks at some of the specific patterns of life that Christians understand as responses to this story – including celibacy and marriage. We ask how these patterns relate to the story we have been telling and ask what Jesus had to say about them.

Part One set out the Church of England’s current teaching on marriage. It explained how that teaching related to the gift of abundant life in loving relationships offered to the whole of humanity through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

In Part Three, we return to the same territory – but here we explore it differently. Our aim now is not to expound the Church of England's current teaching in these areas. It is, instead, to explore the kinds of thinking that are going on in the church's deliberations and debates about these topics and to see how that thinking relates to the good news of Jesus Christ.

Christians are people who seek to live within, and become defined by, a story – a story which we believe to be true. It is a story drawn from Scripture, reaffirmed in the creeds and celebrated in the liturgies of the church. We try to tell that story in our worship, in our preaching, and in our conversations and actions in the world. We are constantly learning afresh how to inhabit it in all manner of different contexts.

It is a story that begins with God, who in love created humankind in the divine image, so that in communion with one another and with Christ we might mirror God's glory. It is a story about our rebellion, disobedience and refusal to depend on one another and on God – a disorder which has infected the whole of creation. It is a story of our desperate need for the mercy and love of God in the face of this sinfulness. It is a story about Jesus, who embraced our humanity, lived among us, and gave himself to death for us so that we and the whole of creation could be set free from the bonds of sin, the forces of evil and the judgement we deserve. It is a story of forgiveness, which invites us to repent daily and to reflect the love of God by forgiving others with the same measure with which we have been forgiven by God. It is the story of Jesus rising from the dead and ascending into heaven and interceding for us and for the whole creation. It is the story of the Church – his body on earth – inaugurated by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit among us so that we could experience the power of God's transforming love in our human weakness. It is a story about the end of death and the beginning of eternal life here and now. It is a story of faith in Jesus Christ, of hope in a new heaven and a new earth, and of the transforming power of God's love.

The Church of England's deliberations and disagreements about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage need to be understood in relation to this story. They have emerged as Christians across the church have asked how to inhabit this story in

love and faith – and how we can stand together ‘firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel’ (Philippians 1.27). There is much that Christians share as we seek to answer these questions, but there are also differences in the way in which we tell the story and differences in the implications we draw from it. Throughout this Part we will be trying both to show how our deliberations and disagreements about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage are grounded in a shared story, *and* how they are shaped by some significant differences in our tellings of that story.

Our hope, therefore, is not that readers will agree with everything they find in this Part, nor that they will conclude that everything here represents the recognized teaching of the Church of England. It is, rather, that readers

- will understand better the kinds of claims that Christians around the church make in the areas of marriage, relationships, sexuality, and human identity;
- will understand why these claims matter to Christians committed to following the way of Jesus Christ; and
- will understand how people committed to the same way can nevertheless sometimes come to such different conclusions.

That is certainly not the end of our exploration.

In Part Four, we will be asking in more detail how it is that Christians end up with these different ways of telling the story of salvation. We look, for instance, at the different approaches to Scripture that can be found across the church and the different attitudes to scientific discoveries.

In Part Five we will listen in on some conversations among the people who have been involved in writing this book. They will draw on what we have discussed in Parts Three and Four. Some advocate the reaffirmation of current teaching and practice; some advocate changes of one kind or another. You could think of Parts Three and Four as setting out a range of building blocks: on their own they are a bit fragmentary and inconclusive, so Part Five shows some of the different ways in which they can be put together to make something coherent and striking.

The focus of Parts Three to Five, then, is on helping readers to better understand the various claims being made around the church about, identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. Understanding this variety is not, however, the same as accepting or approving it. There remains a serious question – which we will point to in these Parts but not fully tackle – of discerning what the proper limits are to the variety of teaching and practice in the church.

In the Appeal at the end of the book, we will hear more directly from the bishops how they hope the Church of England will engage with all the Living in Love and Faith resources and use them to discern the way forward, so that good decisions and right judgements are made about our common life.

CHAPTER 8

A story of love and faith with hope

At the heart of all things is the love of God: 'God is love' (1 John 4.8,16).

The story of salvation that the Bible tells is the story of the never-ending intimacy of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It is about a way of loving that reaches out in self-giving to the world: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' (John 3.16)

The story of salvation is a story that calls humanity to dwell in God's never-ending intimate communion of love in obedience and joy: 'If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete' (John 15.10-11). To become a Christian is to enter this story of God's love. The story of salvation is a love story.

In the story of creation, we discover that human beings exist because God reached out in love and freedom and created humankind as a partner and friend with whom to share love and delight. At each stage of creation God saw that 'it was good' (Genesis 1.4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25); on the day God created humankind 'it was very good' (Genesis 1.31).

In the story of the fall, we discover that almost from the outset human beings turn away from God's abundant love to the scarcity of their own imagining. They pull up their own roots, turning to selfishness, envy and enmity. We see the whole world affected by this turning away, this sin (Genesis 3). And we learn that judgement is part of this love story: 'The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word I have spoken will serve as judge' (John 12.48), says Jesus to his disciples. Precisely because God is love, and precisely because God longs to share that love with the world, God stands against all that rejects and betrays that love. The story of salvation speaks of God's grief at the evil inclinations of human hearts (Genesis 6.5,6); it speaks of God's condemnation of that evil and of God's wrath against it (Psalm 90.7-12).

As the story continues, however, we also see the creativity of God's love. God writes new chapters in this love story, finding ways to call human beings away from their rejections and betrayals and re-establish them in love. The story of Noah shows us how God judges the world for the evil of its ways. It also shows us how God calls one man, Noah, and his family, out of that benighted world, to live again as human beings were meant to live. In the story of Abraham, we hear how God calls into being a particular people and promises to be with them in love. In the story of Moses, we hear how God frees that people from slavery, and promises to teach them how to live – how to inhabit and respond to God's love and how to turn away from all that dishonours that love. We hear how God makes a covenant with that people, showing how that love may be sustained forever. As the story of God's people continues, we hear how that

love was cultivated, honoured, jeopardised and almost lost – in tales of prophets, priests and kings. Eventually, we hear of Israel going into exile in Babylon, as if the covenant were finally broken and God had turned away. But then we hear how God brings Israel back from Babylon, carrying a renewed sense of who God is and of the trustworthiness of God's loving promises.

And then, at the great turning point of history, God enters the story directly by coming among us, fully God and fully human. Jesus is the God of love incarnate, God's love in the flesh. From a position of intimacy – lying 'close to the Father's heart' (John 1.18) – Jesus lives out the love, tenderness, and compassion of God among us, holding fast to that love all the way through death (Philippians 2.1–11). Jesus shows what love entails by shaping a community of followers. He demonstrates what love requires by spending time with those excluded from the society of his time. He practises what love dictates by challenging the authorities of his time. And because these three commitments bring him into conflict with a world that rebels against and rejects God's love, they lead to his arrest, torture and execution. Jesus suffers the condemnation that should be ours, enduring the consequences of our sin – and refuses to respond with anything but love, all the way to the grave. And God vindicates him, raising him from the dead, lifting him up so that all people can be drawn to him in love and come to share the life of love that he embodies.

And so the last words of the risen Christ to Peter in John's Gospel ring out through the ages as an invitation to all humanity, 'Follow me!' (John 21.22).

Divine and human love

The revelation of the God of love in Jesus is the subject of the First Letter of John.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4.7–10)

Love is the reason for creation; and sharing love with God is the reason for the creation of human beings. The lavish love that God bestows upon creation is meant to cascade through human lives. 'Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us' (1 John 4.11,12).

Human love, in all its richness and glory, reflects this prior love of God. Acts of self-giving for the good of the other – gifts of time, attention, nurture and care, the tender touch of lovers, the enduring commitment of friends – are luminous with God's light. If we love one another, God lives in us. Over time, as we learn to love, God's image is perfected in us. Our love can deepen, the more we know ourselves to be the objects of eternal love – a love that is entirely unselfish, entirely attentive, entirely oriented to the flourishing of all God's creatures.

Love is the intersection of God's life and our life. When we love selflessly, devotedly, truly, we come close to perceiving the nature of God's love – indeed, the nature of God who is love. Every moment of conversion is a discovery that love is stronger than hate, than evil, than death. Every process of reconciliation is a statement that love is truer than enmity, estrangement, disharmony. The story of the Church is one in which this love takes earthly, human, institutional form. There are constant setbacks, wrong paths and mistakes, but love is the name for the Spirit that makes something beautiful out of even the worst failure.

Eventually, in God's time, there will only be love. Love is the only thing that lasts forever (1 Corinthians 13). We will find a love untainted by selfishness, unlimited by death and unsullied by unworthy wants and needs. Beyond the last day, when sorrow and sighing and pain are no more and God dwells among humankind, that love, finally fully answering God's love, will abide. Love will never pass away.

Faith in love

Faith is, at root, trust. It is trust expressed in concrete steps into the unknown, through tangible acts that express our convictions about what is true and our confidence in a relationship on which we depend.

But Christianity doesn't begin with our faith in God. It is founded on God's faithfulness to us. God shows unfailing faithfulness, even in the face of human faithlessness and rebellion (Deuteronomy 7.9; Psalm 91.4, 103.15-17; Hosea 11.8,9; 1 Corinthians 1.9; 1 John 1.9; 1 Thessalonians 5.24; 2 Thessalonians 3.3). In the covenant God makes with Israel at Mount Sinai, God's faithfulness to Israel is a given. Israel praises the Lord because the Lord's mercy endures forever. One of the great paradoxes with which Paul wrestles is how the God who made such promises to Israel can be regarded as faithful now that those promises have been extended to the Gentiles - but he remains convinced that God remains true to those promises. God's love abides forever; faithfulness is its form. Where there is faithfulness there is invariably love; but the love that does not issue in faithfulness invariably turns out not to be love at all.

Paul says to the Christians in Corinth that love 'bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends' (1 Corinthians 13.7,8). There can be no love without faith, because we cannot know all things about one another, even about God. Instead we must take some things on trust and our word for that trust is faith. Without that faith, we cannot love, because our love would be inhibited, circumscribed and impoverished by suspicion, anxiety and fear. When the First Letter of John says perfect love casts out fear, it means that with love comes trust, and trust is the opposite of fear. Complete trust means no anxiety and no fear.

The story of Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a paradigm of the failure of faith (Genesis 3). The serpent persuades Eve that God's words are not trustworthy. Not trusting God, Adam and Eve behave as if there were no God, or as if they themselves were God, and simply follow their unformed desires. Even with the clear revelation of God's wishes and God's purpose, human beings still fail to trust God. A similar pattern appears when Moses is with God on the mountain and the children of Israel make a golden calf to worship because they have lost trust in God (Exodus 32). Likewise David spots Bathsheba and conspires to make her his own, even though he is well aware of God's abundant faithfulness towards him (2 Samuel 11,12). These stories display the way human beings struggle to trust, and how lack of trust, or of faith, leads to the distortion of love into control and manipulation, and the misconstrual of God's mercy not as a blessing but as a threat.

We were made for love. The rejection of God's offer of love, the gift that brings life, leads us towards death. Yet God continues to offer us love – and Jesus' life, death and resurrection are God's ultimate way of offering this love to the world. In Jesus' life, and in his death on the cross, God takes on the cost of rebuilding love in a world that has turned against it. Refusing, on the cross, our refusal of love, God invites human beings to turn away from our betrayal of love, to be forgiven for that betrayal, and to receive in faith the life of love that steps out from the tomb alive and victorious. This is the work of redemption, the gift of God to fallen humanity, raising us from sin and death and drawing us up into love and on into love's perfection. Faith is believing in this love and entrusting one's life to it.

Love is the grain of the universe, the DNA of creation. Faith is the trust that love is true, that it is indeed at the heart of all things and that it will prevail. Christian faith is trust in Jesus – trust that Jesus truly is fully God and fully human, that he truly does represent everything of God to us and everything of us to God. Faith is trusting that the commandments Jesus gives are the way of life and truth. Faith is trusting that when we stray from God's way of life, Christ's death truly brings about the forgiveness of sins and his resurrection truly is the end of death. Faith is trust in the Holy Spirit to do what we cannot do for ourselves: make Christ present to us until the last day.

Hope of glory

John the Baptist's disciples came to Jesus and on his behalf asked, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' (Matthew 11.3; Luke 7.19). Even with Jesus in their midst, those who longed for God's kingdom sometimes struggled to trust in him. Friedrich Nietzsche, arch-critic of Christianity, said 'Better songs they would have to sing to make me believe in their Redeemer: more redeemed would disciples have to appear!'²⁷² He might also have said, 'I might believe in the Saviour if the world looked more as if it had been saved.'

These two challenges, the shortcomings of the Church and the continuing evil and suffering in the world, are the principal reasons why it is hard to trust that love has been and will finally be the quality that abides forever. If *love* is that which truly reigns, and *faith* is that which trusts in the God who has acted, most of all in Jesus, then we need a third word – for the trust that love will finally prevail. That

third word is hope. Hope is the orientation of one's life towards the faith that love alone will abide forever.

Intercessory prayer is an act of hope. In prayer Christians trust that the God whose character has been demonstrated in covenant loyalty and has been fully disclosed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, will finally pervade all things with love. Such prayer is often accompanied by lament, the naming of the distance between how God wills things to be and the way they actually are. But intercession is fundamentally a plea that God will bring forward some of the fruits of the final fulfilment so that we may enjoy them now. That's what forgiveness is; that's what healing is; that's what reconciliation is: a taste now of what we shall in Christ enjoy forever. When in the Song of Solomon (8.6) we are told that 'love is strong as death', we affirm the faith that in Christ love has outlasted death and the hope that the victory of God's love will abide forever. That claim in the Song of Solomon is preceded by the words, 'Set me as a seal upon your heart' (Song of Solomon 8.6). This shows that faith, hope and love are always intimate and personal as well as cosmic and perpetual. But it also suggests that what we see today is just the sketchy figure of what will finally be ours. It is the down-payment, engagement ring, or dim reflection in a mirror.

To believe in love despite our personal failings, the sins of the Church and the state of the world takes hope. Hope is not the same as optimism, since hope believes the one who makes things right is *personal being*, not an inanimate force of nature or luck. Hope is not in ourselves, because Christians believe the ultimate future is not something we create; it is the reality God brings to us. Christian hope in the future does not rest upon our assessment of whatever forces seem to be winning in the present, but trust that God's love will have the ultimate victory. It brings people to make remarkable sacrifices for the sake of being faithful. It has been said, 'It is better to fail in a cause that will finally succeed than to succeed in a cause that will finally fail.' That is a succinct summary of hope; and it rests on faith that the God of love has already, in a fundamental way, succeeded. And so as we wait with patience for God to disclose this final purpose across all creation, we work to nurture whatever signs and foretastes of that victory are to be seen in the present.

As Paul tells us, faith, hope and love abide (1 Corinthians 13.13). These are the marks of the intimate and cosmic story that will finally embrace us and all things in joy and peace forever.