



## **“Crisis or Kairos?”**

### ***A survey of the biology and sociology of homosexuality***

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In 1985 a group of theologians, doing what was then called Third World Theology, came together to write *The Kairos Document*.<sup>1</sup> This was their response to the political crisis in South Africa; the Kairos Document they said was ‘a Christian, biblical and theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa today’. In reflecting upon the schismatic language appearing in the media from a variety of sources about the Church of Scotland in recent months, I re-read this document. Beyond the innumerable permutations in each context, their similarities and differences, the fact of separation or even let’s say ‘apartness’ driven by divergent convictions was the outcome both in 1985 and the present day. In a bid to understand, reason and offer hope the *Kairos* authors fearlessly faced the growing horror and called it was it was, *crisis*. But it was also, they said, a moment for

KAIROS, the moment of grace and opportunity, the favourable time when God issues a challenge to decisive action ... Jesus wept over Jerusalem ... and all because you did not recognise your opportunity (KAIROS) when God offered it. (see St. Luke 19: 44)

They go on to say,

A crisis is a judgement that brings out the best in some people and the worst in others. A crisis is a moment of truth that shows us up for what we really are. There will be no place to hide and no way of pretending to be what we are not in

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The Kairos Document’, Russell Press England 1985

fact. At this moment in South Africa the Church is about to be shown up for what it really is and no cover up will be possible.

During the General Assembly 2009 and in the run up to it there was much talk about preserving the unity of our denomination; that our breadth of theological opinion has traditionally been a tie that binds more strongly than it is a chord threatening to choke us all. John Wesley went to his grave appealing for the Methodists to remain in the Hanoverian Church of England.

One of the most intractably separated areas in the world is the Middle East; in that place breadth of opinion has long slid into a division marked by military oppression, economic devastation and a snowballing hatred which conveniently keeps sides apart and happily, for the status quo, on a Road Map to nowhere. But within and through that cauldron, in that place where intractability has identity-stamped itself onto the foreheads of as many enemies as friends, the prophets of God have long looked to Abraham – not for easy unity but for deep understanding; whose meaning digs so far below the surface layers of human-piled agenda-gods and idol-ideals that on all sides stuck people can be jolted into a slightly new position.

During the Civil Partnerships debate at the 2006 General Assembly the Moderator, the then Rt Rev Dr Alan McDonald called on the Biblical themes of hospitality and fellowship to be the mediating arms by which debate-divided commissioners might talk together. He called on delegates to invite unlikely friends for a cup of tea or coffee – people with whom they knew there would be differences and yawning disagreements. The same invitation reverberated at this year's Assembly both during The Case debate over the call of Rev Scott Rennie to Queen's Cross Church as well as in the preliminary debating to the planned Overture<sup>2</sup> by Lochcarron & Skye Presbytery. Nothing seems to rift the Church quite like a debate about sex – and given this recurrent thorn in our flesh perhaps the Abrahamic example of hospitality and fellowship in an inhospitable and dangerous place like Mamre<sup>3</sup> can be a helpful guide to us all? As Mennonite Pastor Glenn Witmer observes, 'Abraham was to become the standard-bearer about how to treat such visitors. He insisted they stop and let him serve them – bringing water to cool their burning feet, some refreshment for their bodies.'<sup>4</sup> But why does this story offer both a challenge as well as a resonance to each one of us and to the collective Body of Jesus Christ in these post Assembly days?

In the book *The Tent of Abraham*<sup>5</sup> Karen Armstrong gleans this about the location and the meaning of the famous story of Abraham welcoming and entertaining the three strangers at Mamre:

Genesis 18 tells us that while he was sitting outside his tent at Mamre in the broiling heat of a Middle Eastern afternoon he saw three strangers on the

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<sup>2</sup> The Overture to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 2009 proposed: "That this Church shall not accept for training, ordain, admit, re-admit, induct or introduce to any ministry of the Church anyone involved in a sexual relationship outside of faithful marriage between a man and a woman".

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 18: 1

<sup>4</sup> See Genesis 18: 3

<sup>5</sup> 'The Tent of Abraham': K. Armstrong: Beacon Press USA 2006

horizon. Strangers in the ancient world were potentially lethal people because they were not bound by the local laws of vendetta and could strike with impunity. Even today few of us would invite three strangers off the street and into our own home. But that is what Abraham did. He ran out eagerly to meet these people who did not belong to his ethnic or religious group. The text emphasises his haste; he is not dragging his feet but runs out to meet them, prostrating himself before them as if they were kings ... this act of practical compassion led to a divine encounter.

For people who believe that we are on dangerous ground in the Church today, the locational aspect of Abraham's story may well resonate – and far from stopping there, Abraham and Sarai pile discomfort on top of the danger they've exposed themselves to; Sarai makes bread, which beneath the inferno of the midday sun would have been torturous. Glenn Witmer teases more understandings.

Abraham didn't know the visitors. He wasn't preparing a welcoming banquet for long-lost friends or family. This was just the way to greet anyone who came your way – strangers from another land, perhaps even enemies! The understanding was on both sides that enmity was set aside during this social exchange. To offer a meal was to say that you held nothing against the other. To accept such hospitality meant in return that you too were willing to set aside any disagreements. If they were indeed strangers when they arrived, they would be friends when they left.<sup>6</sup>

When rifts are broad it can be hard to even imagine common ground and the space between grows more into a field for battle. Eating and drinking together is a final act of Christ with his brothers before the most painful parting of all. And just when we believe that we have the 'other' sussed the writer of Hebrews tells us, 'Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.'<sup>7</sup>

If there is a crisis of separation growing or already in the Kirk I believe the Third World Theology emanating from the place of most painful crisis and separation, 1980's Apartheid South Africa, offers us spiritual sustenance. In acknowledging crisis the theologians were freed to know what was needed. In recognising and admitting to crisis a realistic remedy was sought and surely gifted in *KAIROS*, which in the words of the Kairos Document said,

South Africa has been plunged into a crisis that is shaking the foundations ... it will deepen and become even more threatening in the months to come ... it is the *KAIROS* moment of truth ... Jesus wept over Jerusalem. He wept over the tragedy of the destruction of the city and the massacre of the people that was imminent, "and all because you did not recognise your opportunity (*KAIROS*) when God offered it"<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 18: 2

<sup>7</sup> Hebrews 13: 2

<sup>8</sup> St Luke 19: 44

The Middle East, from whence comes so much separation and hateful division is also the place which offers a healing and a balm and whose indigenous gifts bode well for its chaotic people. Abraham's story, revered across the great monotheistic religions, offers much healing potential across divides. And if nothing else it offers this:

the word most often associated with hospitality in the Septuagint ... is *xenos*. It literally means foreigner, stranger or even enemy. Later it came to mean guest or host – the ones involved in the social act of sharing a meal. By New Testament times, one who receives strangers is said to be *philoxenos*, a lover of strangers.<sup>9</sup>

'Fancy a coffee?' Simple everyday words, weighted with spiritual sustenance and loaded with a nourishment invisible to the naked eye but perhaps seen by heaven. Let's do coffee with an unlikely friend, with someone whose ideas are strange. Such an everyday act of what may feel like practical compassion may lead to a divine encounter. Who knows what may happen over the beans. We may not see it, but our Father in heaven will.

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<sup>9</sup> 'Word on the Street' by Rev G. Witmer; Nazareth Village Press 2006 . Vol. 2, No. 5.