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Patience is a most useful virtue

*Theological and political battles require space and understanding, argues **James Woodward***

All of us live with conflict. We experience conflict in relationships; we can be the cause of conflict, for example at work. I want to examine the inevitability of conflict and encourage us to reflect how best we might use it to enlarge our sympathies.

We can often disagree over our beliefs. So, for example, friends are not bound together by a shared political view of how best to provide for the common good. At General Election time, a group of friends might gather to watch one of the televised debates between the party leaders. Over supper, they declare political allegiances. Amid some good-humoured comments, none of them seems ready to change his or her preconceived position. Voices are raised, but whatever is said is not likely to make much difference.

There is a different type of conflict when, to use another example, an experienced group of educators and theologians gather to learn about Continuing Indaba in the Anglican Communion. This is a process designed to introduce us to a “journey of conversation”, so that relationships for mission are deepened between those of divergent views. Here, we are confronted by difference over firmly held convictions about the Church, human life, and theology.

There are people in the group that I disagree with. We are all aware of the destructive shape of conflict between Christians, and its power to detract from our shared commitment to living the gospel. It does not take much time for conflict to emerge. This takes the shape of challenge (whose voices are we listening to?), and questioning the process (where is the power?). We all wonder about the reality of who is included and who is excluded from the table. Some have the courage to speak, while others remain silent.

Conflict might be defined as the opposition of facts, needs, methods, or values. This may relate to how we interpret scripture and tradition. We disagree about how far, if at all, the tradition can develop to accommodate change. Liberal attitudes to sex are, for some, a symptom of the Church’s malaise.

Conflict may be shaped by our class, gender, and culture. In some places in Britain, for example, people vote according to the tradition of their class. Women and men look for different things in the political process.

The first thing we need to do is to name the nature of the conflict. In the example of the friends arguing about politics, the need some feel for change in government overrides any attention to the arguments of the Labour Party. Experience, personality, and education bear upon the views people hold.

In such situations, resolution seems impossible. We therefore have to live with the resulting tensions. We may say things that we come to regret. We may come to hate

others who do not share our world-view. We may want to hold on to the cause for conflict and seek revenge.

If our expectation is certainty and the elimination of contradiction, then it is unlikely that we shall want to engage with conflict or understand its roots. Some may want the Church to be unambiguous and direct, especially in the area of ethics.

We may simply misunderstand what another attempts to express because we have dismissed what we believe to be his or her political views. We may want control at the cost of others. There are always voices that are convenient for us to dismiss as irrelevant.

We all have to learn to live with the consequences of conflict. Conflict can be destructive when it absorbs our energies, polarises people, and sharpens difference. There may be people in that room I disagree with, but I should attempt to listen and be challenged. We might even be changed for the good.

This is not to argue that conflict should be avoided. Conflict can be constructive when it results in the clarification of important questions. The Indaba process at the most recent Lambeth Conference enabled a listening that held difference, and where people were empowered to become part of the solution through offering a process of authentic communication. This builds co-operation among people through learning more about each other.

We might want to resolve conflict by surrendering our own needs to accommodate the other party. This is unlikely to happen in either political choices or in the present crisis in the Anglican Communion. It is more likely that we avoid conflict by ignoring it, or by choosing not to be challenged by its deeper wisdom.

This avoidance can be useful as a temporary measure to buy time, or as an expedient means of dealing with minor, non-recurring conflicts. In more severe cases, conflict-avoidance can involve severing a relationship or leaving a group. This is a reality Anglicanism is living with.

In this process, collaboration must always be a possibility —working together to find a mutually beneficial solution. This collaboration is time-intensive. If conflict is to be resolved, most often this will mean compromise. It will certainly demand patience.

The Bible pictures human life as a conflict between good and evil. In both Testaments, it is set in the context of a heavenly warfare, while the cross is the paradoxical herald of victory. Given this tradition, Christians ought to be realistic about the realities of relationships. We know that conflict lies at the heart of the gospel: its scheme of redemption links the conflict between good and evil with personal salvation.

If we are to make this real, it will need some patience. Patience makes possible a life of deferred gratification, attending to arguments and waiting for fruit to ripen before harvesting it. It is difficult to imagine a more countercultural way to live in our materialistic, fast-paced society.

Knowing that this life is not all there is; that God's time is not ours; and that God's future is far better than we can imagine — all this makes possible a life of open-handed generosity. This generosity should be extended especially to those we find ourselves in disagreement with.

We should also be patient with ourselves. We grumble. Paul uses the word “groan” to describe the way all creation groans together, eager to be freed from “its bondage to decay” (Romans 8.21-23). Christians are not to stand aside from that pain and yearning, but to share with all humanity in suffering and hoping for God's salvation.

Patience involves a capacity to suspend such judgement, to live with unresolved problems and relationships. We need to nurture the gift of space, so that we can live with the reality of discord. We do not need to impose a quick fix on messy situations. We shall certainly need to give room to continuing to attend to those we are in conflict with.

Only in this way, living in the light of God's judgement and salvation, might we cultivate mutual understanding. We do not have to force events by dismissing those who threaten us with their opposing positions, or to manipulate relationships in order to get what we think we want.

Rather, we have to give ourselves and others the time to understand how people come to their convictions about human flourishing, both in religion and society. Accepting diversity might help us to grow into the kind of fellowship of love asked of us by the gospel.

The premature resolution of conflict usually inflicts some kind of violence on one of the parties involved, for instance by silencing them. The patience to listen, to withhold judgement, to attend to each person's or group's concerns is a significant part of diplomacy, whether in pastoral care, family life, church politics, or international relations. James calls this kind of diplomacy the “wisdom from above”, which is “pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity” (James 3.17).

This is challenging work. In and through conflict we are offered the possibility of transformation. It will involve our taking risks. So, befriend your enemies: they may well be the source of a wiser living. Look for the sound and good in those you feel have the least right to be your teacher. Coalition thinking might help us to think about more than the preservation of self and particular theological or political views.