

As gay and lesbian people, it can feel as if we have plenty to wrestle with in the night, plenty to keep us awake. For however confident and affirmed and blessed we feel as people who are both gay and Christian, these are difficult times, and I doubt there's a person here tonight who doesn't sometimes lose heart. Even if we feel OK with ourselves and with God, there's still plenty to disturb and despair of within our churches. How are we to hold all this together? How are we to see the way ahead? How are we to live authentically and with integrity in the midst of the mess all around us?

How am I supposed to respond in love to my friends who are wounded, hurt and confused about how the church speaks of them? When the churches reject us, refuse to recognise God's presence in our relationships - goodness knows, when the church presumes to judge whose relationships are blessed by God and whose are not? When the church refuses to treat our sense of calling with respect, to test our vocations fairly, to allow us to live out our calling with integrity and openness? When the church insists on acting with wilful selectiveness in naming its own nature, and asks us to collude - as if pretending might just make it all go away.

In the very darkest moments, when we're wrestling with the pain, confused thinking and condemnation of our churches and amongst our brother and sister Christians, can we say, like Jacob, 'I have seen God face to face - and survived'?

Perhaps it's at times like this that the idea of the 'long now' can most help us to see a way forward, and to hold onto hope. Our faith has a long track record - an unbroken thread down the centuries, linking people like you and me, just trying to keep the rumour of God alive, and to leave something behind after us. And of course, my faith demands that I believe that there's no experience, no part of being human, that Jesus hasn't shared, doesn't know intimately, because he was both fully divine and fully human. Ah yes - Jesus. You know, I do have a strong sense that, were Jesus to offer for ministry in the Church of England right now, he'd be highly unlikely even to be recommended for training - though that may be small comfort to the good and holy priests I hear speak of leaving the church, because they believe that's the only choice left open to them.

So we're engaged in this struggle between the church and the kingdom. And it's nothing new, even in very recent memory. Most Christians of my age will well recall the struggle for women's

ordination, and the pain and distress that was part of that particular chapter in the church's story - a chapter which other denominations, of course, managed to have done and dusted long before us Anglicans! Others of you will take women's ministry completely for granted. You won't remember the letters to the newspapers, the dire threats about how many would leave the church, the accusations of how selfish and reckless women were being, insisting on something which God could not possibly want and which would have dire consequences. We would be responsible for splitting the church, turning over centuries of tradition, of going against God's express plan for us. And for many women, the question of whether they could remain in a church which spoke of them as it sometimes did - as a taint, as 'less than', as troublesome and ungodly - was a very live one.

It really, really felt as if change would never come. And yet women, and men, continued to talk, to pray, to reflect, to organise themselves, to work, and to wait. And change did come, and you're living it. And out of that struggle came a different way of understanding God, of relating to God and one another, of being human and becoming more human, and becoming just that little bit more like Jesus.

And yet, that change has come at a cost, and it's an evolving change, we're not quite there yet. Even very recently, a woman priest was appointed to a position in an Anglican cathedral, and arrangements have been made for those who don't want to receive communion from a woman, whereby there are two sets of wafers, two chalices, and people can choose. Now, of course I'm all for trying to embrace people who hold to a different understanding to my own, but, more than ten years on, just what kind of message does that send about the full inclusion of women in the life and ministry of the church? And how painful must that be, not just for the woman herself, but for those who have witnessed and been part of her unfolding sense of calling. We are all still struggling.

As LGBT people, can we somehow hold our present struggles up in the light of those stories, I wonder? And what are the other struggles that our ancestors down the years would remind us of? I can only remember twenty years back - less than one per cent of the life of the church. The 'Long Now' is an exciting way of seeing, but it calls us to develop a remarkable depth of field, as photographers would call it, and that's something of a challenge.

As an Anglican, perhaps that shouldn't be so difficult, though heaven knows it is! We have such short memories, yet such a rich heritage. I worship in a new church - the old one was knocked down to make room for Lincoln cathedral. And on the rare occasions I go to evensong at the cathedral, prayers are said for members of the cathedral community past and present. People who died in the 1600's are remembered like old and familiar friends, all linked together by that unbroken thread.

Shame, then, I'm bound to say, that we spend so much of our time behaving like it still is 1600! Can we hold onto the 'long now', leaving the past and moving forward confidently into the future, or will we always be drawn back into the comfortable familiarity of the past? Or will we become so focused on avoiding what we see as the mistakes of the past that we fail to catch the unique vision God has set before us, the new thing God would like us to be part of creating. What use is this glance backwards if it doesn't help us make sense of the now? What are we to do? What's our way forward?

Well, I don't have an answer for that, because I don't know. Only God knows, because for each one of us, the call to respond to the 'now' will be different and unique and only you and God can discern that together - although we'll need one another's support and love and prayers as we go about doing that. Some of us will be called to think, some to talk, some to listen, some to reconcile and reflect. Some of us will be called to hang in there, and some will be called to start something new. We'll need to be brave, and to be rooted and grounded in God, and wise to discern the signs of the kingdom - sometimes in the middle of the church, sometimes on the edge, and very often a long way beyond. For when a civilisation turns, we can't expect to keep finding God in the old, familiar places.

And some of us will be called to do nothing, but simply to wait, keeping watch in the long night, listening for a word, and when it comes, having the courage to carry it into the light and speak it.

And sometimes, we'll engage with people who are very clearly opposed to what we stand for, to the truth we've found - sometimes people within the traditions and churches that have nurtured us this far. And in very darkest night, sometimes the thing that comes back to us, is that maybe they're right. And we're wrong. Perhaps that's the scariest thing of all. Any yet, perhaps it's also

the thing which keeps us grounded, and humble, and open to change and new possibilities, and which keeps us from arrogance. Because it seems to me that the opposite of faith isn't doubt, as I was once taught. It's certainty.

And however difficult it sometimes seems to discern a way ahead, it seems to me that Jesus did give us pretty clear instructions about the things He'd like us to keep doing. Not much instruction in the bedroom department, but plenty about love, and forgiveness and perseverance and hope. But mostly about love.

And he also talked about another thing he'd like us to do. When he was facing his darkest night, about to be betrayed by all his friends, abandoned by God - in confusion and pain beyond anything we can begin to imagine, he told his friends to share a meal together. To keep telling the story, to share bread and wine, to remember, to offer to God, to receive back, to go out and share. It makes no sense at all - but it's the thing Jesus told us to do, and it's what we'll do together tomorrow. However you understand his commandment, however your particular community of faith keeps the feast, however that mystery is unfolding for you, it seems to me to be pretty close to the heart of it all.

And this much I do know. That we will need to learn to live with the questions, and not expect easy answers, or answers in our own time. Perhaps institutional change won't come quickly, or won't fulfil our expectations - certainly the recent story of that woman priest and the alternative sets of wafers suggests that it might not - so we need to be living the eternal bit of the long now, right now. Living as if the kingdom has already come. We'll need to be willing to say that we don't know, or that we're still living with the uncertainties, still hanging onto faith. And even if we feel like losing faith with our churches, we must, must still find a way of holding all this together as the body of Christ. All the pain and the hurt and the confusion and the joy and the hope, and all that we have learned about ourselves and about God in the struggle. The blessing and the healing and the transformation, of ourselves and our world.

We have to share what we have heard during our long night of watching and listening and waiting, try to give it shape and voice and to bear witness - to one another, to those who doubt us, to the church and to the world. Because therein lies our brightest hope.