

Shared Conversations WY & Dales 30th January 2016

Quite a task before us; Listening to the Bible.

Prayer: Psalm 119:18 'Open my eyes so that I may behold wondrous things out of your law'

I realise from very many different people and places, having been part of Shared Conversations in the NW, Pilling Group, Cascade conference for Scottish Episcopal Church and many private conversations, including with Loveday (Alexander), there are those who seriously question whether much of the Bible is 'wondrous' for those who self-identify as LGBTI;

My hope this morning is not necessarily to persuade everyone that what the Bible says is always 'wondrous' – though I profoundly believe that it is for all people - but that this at least is what the Bible is saying – you may be one who wants the church to set aside its teaching, but can we honestly say, this is not what it does teach? Today I want to offer you these texts so that over the next three weeks you can reflect and pray as you engage with cultural and pastoral experiences (see handout with the texts in this address).

Please don't do what Psalm 50:17 says the people of Israel did to the Lord: 'You cast my words behind you'.

Listening to the Bible

I'd like to start at the end.

In the book of Revelation there are 7 letters to churches which each end with the command "Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Rev 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:29, 3:6, 3:13, 3:22).

It must be important to be repeated so emphatically, which means it must be possible to hear what the Spirit is actually saying. Which means it must be possible for us to hear the Spirit too. The shared conversations in dioceses across the Church of England are taking place with the prayer that we will hear "what the Spirit is saying" about sexuality, marriage and the church's life and mission.

In the case of these 7 churches, what the Spirit is saying is contained in each letter, it has been written down for them, and in each case includes encouragement and rebuke, promise and warning. The letters are part of the final book of the Bible to tell us how the Spirit will keep speaking to the churches as we listen to what has been written down for us, as St Paul says in Romans 15:4 "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope". And that hope according to the book of Revelation is a new heaven and a new earth, and the arrival of the heavenly city "*prepared as a bride adorned for her husband*" (Rev 21:2).

It is the significance of that image at the end of the Bible that I want to take as my starting point for understanding why the Bible says what it says about marriage and sex and why that still matters, and why we still need to listen to the Spirit speaking through these words.

The metaphor of the bride and bridegroom (the woman and the man joined in marriage) is used to convey the beauty and glory of our ultimate destiny in the new heaven and new earth. This is where the story is going, it is the destiny of his kingdom and gospel, and the vision speaks of his presence and authority, and what is included and excluded in the new humanity; "people will bring into it the glory and honour of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Rev 21:26, 27).

The Church, as the 7 letters describe her, is to anticipate that life now, and where they are not living it they are to repent; part of what threatens that life is false teaching (Rev 2:2, 2:14) and sexual immorality, which is adultery and fornication (2:20,21). (Lest we think there is any particular unhealthy preoccupation about sex

here, sexual imagery is extended to describe the immorality of economic greed and oppression exemplified by Babylon in Rev 18.)

The Church is called to witness in an extremely hostile and dangerous environment to the supremacy and saving love of Christ (“faithful and true” Rev 19:11) and part of that witness enabled only by the indwelling Christ (Rev 3:20) is a witness to the teaching of the rest of the Bible that the only place for sexual union is in a relationship that is not adulterous (outside of marriage between a man and woman) or fornication (before or apart from a marriage of a man and a woman).

Now it is my contention that this is what the Spirit is still saying to the Church and that there is nothing in scripture (or culture or even pastoral experience) which permits us to come to any other conclusion. And if you find that shocking as I think you might, think of Jesus words in the sermon on the mount, about adultery, where the look as well as the act can take you into sin (Matt 5:8), and then the conclusion of Jesus “be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48).

But the mission of Jesus was not to moralise, as if “be perfect” was the end of the message (thank God) rather it is the good news of the kingdom, which includes “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matt 4:17) and the “forgiveness of sins” (Matt 9:6), for in the realm of sexuality as in every other part of my life and I suspect yours (as with anger), we become most aware of our falling short and most glad that our failing is not the end but the beginning of our story with God.

Let me now try to justify the claim about what sexual relationships in the kingdom of heaven look like according to the Spirit in scripture and urge you to go on listening to what the Spirit is saying to the Church, even if the result is to take us to our knees in repentance, glad beyond measure for the gift of forgiveness and new life in the Spirit.

I would like to outline what this listening to the Bible means by taking us through 7 headings:

Creation

Law + Prophets

Story + Song

Gospel

Church

Difference + Doubt

Love

Creation

The key texts are Genesis 1:26-31 and 2:18-25, the two accounts of creation in which we learn that humankind is made in the image of God, male and female, that male and female are to have dominion over the earth, and that they are to be fruitful and multiply. And that all this is very good. We also learn that even before the fall it is not good for man to be alone and that to address that aloneness, the helper is created, the woman, and the declaration

“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh. And the man and the woman were both naked and were not ashamed” (Gen 2:24, 25, quoted let us note immediately by Jesus (Matt 19:5) and Paul (Ephesians 5:31) who both evidently believed the Spirit was continuing to speak through these words).

From which we learn amongst many other things, that gender and sexual union are God's ideas, that they are good, very good, that this sexual relationship is core to humanity's mission in the world and future existence, that it transcends the generations (leaving father and mother), that it is foundational for all cultures everywhere on earth, that the sexual union implies permanence and faithfulness, and that permanence and faithfulness makes no sense without the sexual union of the man and the woman; it is in this union that there can be clinging and one flesh.

'The exclusive sexual union between one man and one woman described in Genesis 2 is the basis for the sexual ethic that has been universally accepted by the Church until the past few years and that is helpfully summarized by C S Lewis in Mere Christianity as 'Either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence.' By 'marriage' Lewis of course means marriage between a man and a woman since the Church has known no other kind.

If there is any doubt as to the core reality of gender difference in sexual union in the Genesis 1 and 2, then the accounts of the flood in Genesis 6-9 should dispel it, because in all the wickedness of humanity which attracts the judgement of God, what is key to Noah's mission is to go into the ark with his wife and his sons and their wives, along with male and female of clean and unclean animals, and this male/female union preserved in the ark is key to the fulfilling of the promise given by the rainbow of the new creation that will follow.

I cannot see any textual justification for marginalising male and female in these accounts as my colleagues on the Pilling Report repeatedly did, so as to retain permanence and faithfulness and dispense with gender difference.

Law and Prophets

The books of Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy describe the giving of the law to establish the identity of a delivered people who are called to fulfil God's purpose in the world and bring blessing to the nations (Gen 12:1-3, 15:1-6); the core commands, the 10 words, (Ex 20:1-21) are given to protect and direct what was given in creation, so the command not to commit adultery is to protect the union of the man and woman, as is the command to honour your father and mother; faithfulness and fruitfulness go together, and this good is good not only for the man and the woman, it is for their mother and father, and for the generations to come.

All the later commands derive from these 10 words, including the prohibition on same sex unions (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13) which come among many other directions for sexual holiness. The Church's prohibited decrees come from these laws (who may lawfully marry another, so that near relation may not marry, incest is prohibited), and the church until the modern period has assumed that these laws reflect the mind and intention of God in relation to sexual conduct, as we have seen in relation to Jesus' quoting the commandment in respect of adultery it is to increase its applicability not diminish it (Matt 5:27 -31). Even where the Law allows divorce, Jesus qualifies its applicability, because he says "in the beginning it was not so" (Matt 19:8). The Law is intended to be an expression of the Creator's good purposes for his creation, and for his people who are to bring that blessing to the world.

If we look at the prophetic writings we see this same combination of celebration and warning. Hear this great culmination to Isaiah 61 (surely one source for Revelations metaphor)

"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all nations".

And this accompanied by so many warnings not to be assimilated to those nations, not least in their sexual conduct, Hosea and Ezekiel are the prophets who do not spare the feelings of the people in their description of Israel as an unfaithful wife, and the priests are the ones chiefly responsible (see Hosea all of it and Ezekiel 16 among many examples). What is striking and instructive for us is the way in the prophetic literature, sexual immorality is linked with idolatry and injustice (see Jeremiah 3-7 for a flavour). Israel's calling is to be different.

Story and Song

As the Spirit teaches us through the word of God, story and song feature as much as creation narrative, law and prophets. The imperfection and messiness of individuals and communities is played out on every page, whether the polygamy of the patriarchs, the conventions of arranged marriage, or the manifestation of gross human sin, most memorably in the destruction of Sodom (Gen 19:5) and the sins associated with it which are many including what we must describe as homosexual rape.

Then there is Samson (Judges 13-16) and David (2 Samuel 11) who I mention because they show us that the world of uncontrolled sexual passion was a reality for the people of God and their leaders in ancient times, and though there is plenty of warning "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25), there is also celebration of beauty, marriage and erotic love (Ruth and the Song of Songs) in which sexual desire is evidently good, understood and enjoyed. The love of David and Jonathan is also celebrated (1 Samuel 18-20) unashamedly. Apart from Saul's sneering accusation (1 Sam 20:30) there is no suggestion that their love was expressed in a sexual relationship, both of course were to marry (more than once in David's case). It is the kind of deep soul friendship that is as recognisable today as then especially, but not exclusively, in sporting and military contexts. If the Davidic authorship of Psalm 19 is right this friendship is not in conflict with the creation of God "the heavens declare the glory of God...In the heavens he has set the sun which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy" or the law of the Lord which "is perfect" "more to be desired are they than gold" "moreover by them is your servant warned" (Psalm 19:1, 5, 7, 10, 11).

Same sex love does not mean same sex union, rather celebration in obedience and mourning in disobedience. If we are most acutely aware of our complexities, glories and failures, we are in good company.

Gospel

Jesus is the one who comes to baptise with water and the Spirit; the ministry of baptism in both is to refine and to be loved (Luke 3:15-22 and parallels). The gospels spell out the kind of sins this will include, and sexual sins are among them (eg Matthew 5:27-30, 19:1-12 and John 4:16-26, 8:1-11).

Again there is the description of same sex love (the author of the 4th gospel "the beloved" (John 21:20), the response to the rich young ruler (Mark 10:21) but no suggestion of same sex union.

Much comment has been made that the gospels are silent on this matter; it is true they are silent on the specific prohibition of same sex union, but given the clarity and intensity of the teaching Jesus gives on marriage, celibacy and divorce, his silence is not because it is unimportant it is because it is unthinkable.

Jesus was quite prepared to modify the food laws and law of the Sabbath and risk serious conflict with the religious leadership of his day. His refusal to open up that possibility in relation to what he says about creation, law and marriage cannot it seems to me to give any ground for arguing that in our day the Spirit is saying something else to us.

Rather the gospel is the coming of the kingdom now which will come in fullness at the end of time, and discipleship is following the way of the King in the company of the King, with his presence and authority operating in the life of the disciple and the life of the new community. There will be refinement with the fire of

the Spirit, renouncing sin including sexual sin, and there will be being loved more than we can possibly know, as the Spirit like the dove hovers over us as over Jesus, speaking words of us because we are in him “You are my beloved”.

This explains why the gospel both affirms marriage as given in the creation and law. Jesus in Matthew 19:4-5 is the one who links Genesis 1:27 we are created male and female; the image of God with Genesis 2:24 one flesh – marriage is of a man and a woman – a creation ordinance, not a cultural construct; - but also warns in case marriage itself becomes an idol and more important than the kingdom of God (Mark 10:28-31); the same categories are used in the kingdom as come from creation and law “Mother/Brother” but now they are those “who hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:19-21).

And of course Jesus models how being unmarried and being within the kingdom of God are entirely compatible, and speaks of the culmination of his ministry as his sacrificial death on the cross (Matt 16:21) and therefore the calling of his disciples to a lifestyle characterised by sacrifice (Matt 16:24-26).

It is important in our discussion to note that the call to discipleship though certainly a call to perfection does not require perfection as a condition of beginning. Quite the opposite, it is the confession of the tax collector not the Pharisee that leads to justification (Luke 18:9-14), Jesus famously says in response to Zacchaeus’ faith “The Son of Man has come to seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10). The gospels wonderfully describe the convicted and confused (including sexually) who find in Jesus, whose gospel invitation is to the weary and heavy laden, rest for their souls (Luke 7:36-50).

Church

According to Ephesians 5:32 the Church is the Bride of Christ and the relationship of Husband and Wife is a “mystery” which is applied to the relationship between Christ and the Church. The new believers are called to devote themselves to the apostles teaching (Acts 2:42) which teaching includes holiness in sexual conduct.

When the Jerusalem Council admits Gentiles as those who have received the Holy Spirit they are called to abstain from fornication (among other things! Acts 15:20, 29 echoing the Levitical prohibitions of Lev 17 -18); and though there is continuing debate about the eating of foods in the epistles in terms of sexual conduct the teaching is crystal clear, marriage (Ephesians 5: 21-32 echoing Genesis 2:24) and appointed leaders expected to model this (1 Timothy 3:1-7) summarised in Hebrews 13:4 “Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers”; which judgement and warning is echoed throughout the New Testament (see eg 1 Corinthians 5, Ephesians 5:3, Colossians 3:5-8, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8, 1 Peter 4:1-5) and specifically in relation to same sex union 1 Cor 6: 9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:10; the NRSV translates “malakoi” and “arsenokoitai” as male prostitutes and sodomites (in the latter case following the AV), the meaning of these words it may not surprise you has been the subject of considerable debate, I give you the words of my NT Professor at Durham, CK Barrett, “the passive and active partners respectively in male homosexual relations”. But then these words in 1 Cor 6:11 “And this is what some of you used to be, but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God”.

It is of course in Romans 1:18-32 that same sex unions between women as well as between men is described as being included in the ungodliness of an idolatrous culture which attracts the wrath of God (Rom 1:18,26-27), idolatry is a rejection of God’s true nature for one that is false, this kind of sexual conduct is a sign of this idolatry because it involves rejection of God’s creation of men and women in his image, and how God has directed they should relate to one another, and, as has often been pointed out, this is to illustrate the sinfulness of the culture in which the church of Jew and Gentile is placed in order for that Church to know the universality of human sinfulness and the universal reach of God’s salvation through the atoning sacrifice of Christ (Rom 3:21-26) “for there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they

are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus". But it is clear that this conduct is viewed as sinful, and in a culture in which same sex unions included such unions between loving adults and where same sex erotic attraction is the subject of frequent public discourse. The missionary challenge of the Church which is the subject matter of all the New Testament letters is that the Church's life is to be different. As the apostle Peter put it

"Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge" (1 Peter 2:11-12).

Difference and Doubt

Was there difference or doubt about what the Spirit was saying in the New Testament period about the sexual conduct of Christian believers in the community of faith?

That there was difference and doubt about the relation of Jews and Gentiles is clear from the content of the NT letters themselves. Only in 1 Corinthians is there an extended consideration of marriage and sexual misconduct (1 Cor 5, 7 and 14).

We have already seen what this excludes, what it includes is an apologia for remaining unmarried (and celibate), a commendation of sexual intimacy within marriage, and an attempt to apply Jesus teaching on divorce and remarriage to the case of desertion by an unbelieving husband. Throughout Paul is concerned to know what it means to be "in the Lord" (7:10, 22, 39) and when he is speaking without the Lord's direct authority (7:12, 25) he hopes what he teaches is consistent with the Lord.

There is no evidence anywhere of anyone advocating either an imitation of the contemporary culture or a reform of it to say that same sex unions that are permanent and faithful are consistent with the Lord's teaching or the apostolic application of it.

There is treatment of handling difference where either the Lord's teaching or apostolic application is unclear; "adiaphora" literally "things indifferent" are discussed in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, 9, 14. I know many would like to make use of this concept to help the Church live with difference now for the sake of unity, and I have considerable sympathy with that desire. Looking at different practise in the NT is hugely instructive for us. The Church's opposition to the institution of slavery came from the way in which the gospel abolished distinctions between slaves and free in Christ (Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11, Philemon and much else in Scripture in relation to creation and justice), even though slaves were part of the NT church. The decision to ordain women to all three orders of ministry came after considerable wrestling with different texts in the NT, in the end, the existence in the NT of women exercising the ministries of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher (and many other texts) meant that other texts (1 Timothy 2:12) were no longer regarded as of universal or permanent application. There is no such variation of practise or dynamic in relation to same sex union in the NT. I cannot see how a matter which in Romans 1 is regarded as under the judgement of God can by Romans 14 be considered a matter "indifferent".

Rather the NT continues the prophetic tradition of warning against false teaching (as per Revelation) "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). Questioning and testing are part of this process but not the repetition of the sin of Genesis 3 listening to the serpent's voice "Did God say..." and then "you shall not die" (Gen 3:1, 4), rather allowing the Spirit of truth to lead us according to the promise of Jesus into all truth, in answer to Jesus prayer "Sanctify them in the truth, your word is truth" (John 16:13, 17:17).

Love

No listening to the Bible would be complete without attention to other warnings and promises in relation to Love. "If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing! (1 Cor 13:2).

The nature of that love is described 1 Cor 13:4-7, and has obvious applicability to a discourse in which many who would wish to self- identify as LGBTI feel the opposite of being loved, and in fact have not been loved; of the need for repentance for failure to love I have no doubt.

As well as the Spirit's words to the Church in Revelation there is the acknowledgment in Corinthians "now we see in a mirror dimly, then we will see face to face" (1 Cor 13:12), the remaining part of that verse also has relevance "Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."

As I have said in "A Conversation Hardly Begun; reflections on shared conversations in the NW" (available on EGGs website), among the greatest of the challenges of listening to the Bible, especially with such radical different readings as those offered to you today, is the call to love and what that means. We need more than ever an Emmaus road encounter with Jesus where "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:27); that includes as we have seen some tough stuff. And one further verse which was on my Bible app this morning which also seems relevant especially when the law and the prophets are tough; we need to hear Romans 5:20 "where sin increased, grace increased all the more".

The call to our current generation in relation to sexual holiness as an expression of love is as difficult to believe as the call to the young man to "go, sell what he owns and give the money to the poor" (Mark 10:21), which word as we have seen is spoken in love. It is costly love, love like that which Jesus demonstrated on the cross and which he prefigured in his washing of his disciples feet, a "loving his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1).

It means those who experience same sex attraction as believers in our current culture are those who will lead the Church in what it means to "lay down their lives for my sake" (Matt 16:25). The last of the 7 letters in Revelation concludes with these words

"I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door I will come in to you and eat with you and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches". (Rev 3:19-22).

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See also www.eggscofe.org.uk; www.livingout.org; www.truefreedomtrust.co.uk